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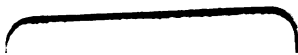
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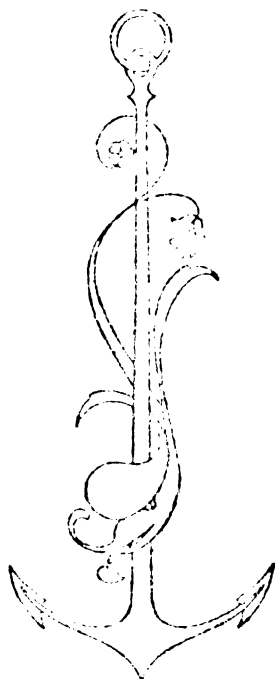


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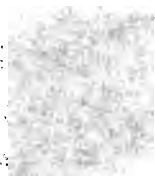
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ERNEST OLDMFADOW

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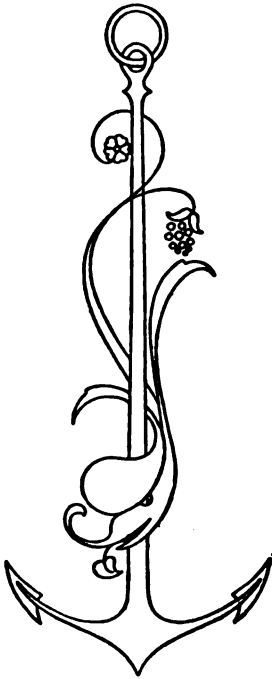


VIRGINIE

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Author of Susan



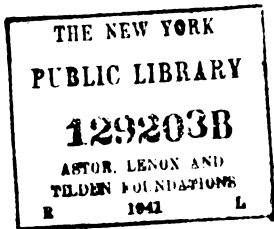
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CONTENTS

	BOOK I	PAGE
THE ICE		I
	BOOK II	
THE WHEAT		93
	BOOK III	
THE FIRE		185
	BOOK IV	
THE MIST		287

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BOOK I
THE ICE



CHAPTER I

ON the first of June, 1906, I took possession of a furnished bungalow about half a mile from Brattle. In the neighbourhood of Brattle a lucky hedger and ditcher had chanced upon a broken Samian bowl of black clay, adorned with seven nymphs in relief. This broken bowl led to the unearthing of a Roman villa with a small but almost perfect pavement representing the burial of Orpheus by the Muses. In archæology I am a dabbler, not an expert. But I found the dabbling very pleasant; and by keeping my mouth and my front door shut I gave Brattle, quite unintentionally, the notion that I was a sound and profound scholar, and a travelled and practised digger into the bargain. Hence it came to pass that the agent of Sir Robert Stacke, on whose land the villa lay, approached me towards the middle of June in a reverential manner and coaxed me into accepting the unsalaried post of excavator-in-chief.

Over and above the pleasure it gave me to have a congenial responsibility and a purpose in



VIRGINIE

life, my new honour did not promise any rich rewards. Beyond the pavement, which had already been visited and copied and written about by armies of antiquaries, both in single spies and in battalions, there seemed to be little left for our spades. A chipped and rain-worn altar, an unusually small sword, a debased, tin-washed denarius of Gallienus, a solidus of Diocletian, and sixty or seventy examples of pottery, all of the Crockhill type, exhausted the list of our discoveries. With the exception of the sword and the denarius, which fell to my share, all these finds were handed over to the Mayor and corporation of Brattle to form the nucleus of a museum.

But my post at the villa was fated to bring me more than a debased coin and an undersized sword. One fiercely hot morning in July, when I was sitting alone after breakfast reading a paper in the bungalow garden, I noticed two men passing and re-passing the gate. After looking at me intently, they lifted the latch and walked up to my chair.

‘Well?’ I said shortly. The two were evidently foreigners, and I felt sure they had come to ask for money.

They took off their caps.

‘We are speaking to Mr. Barrison?’ asked the younger and better-looking, in good, quick English.

‘My name is Barrison,’ I answered, ‘but I don’t know yours.’



THE ICE

'I think you do. The name is Canuto. But that's neither here nor there.'

'Have you any business with me?'

'Perhaps Yes, perhaps No. I hope Yes. If we don't do business together, I shall be surprised.'

'Come,' I said, annoyed. 'I'm busy. If you've something to say, say it and be done with it.'

'May we sit on the grass? My man and I were misdirected, and we have walked a long way.'

'What is it you want? If it's money ——'

'It is and it isn't. If we take your money, it will be as the butcher and the baker take it — for value received.' He paused; then added warmly: 'If you think we have come begging, you are much mistaken.'

I moved my chair two or three yards away so that they could sit beside me on a rustic bench.

'Now?' I said.

'Mr. Barrison,' he began, watching my face closely, 'I am a collector, like yourself. The difference is that your taste is for the antique, while mine, just at present, is all for the modern. Again, you collect simply for pleasure, while I, although I delight in the things that pass through my hands, am forced to think of profit. One must live.'

'You want to sell something?'

'I do and I don't. To put it bluntly, I have something to pawn.'



VIRGINIE

‘Then why come to me? This isn’t the Three Golden Balls.’

He laughed politely. ‘When I talk of pawning,’ he said, ‘I don’t mean it literally. I hardly expect a pawnbroker in Brattle to take in such a pledge as mine.’

‘If it’s a work of art,’ I answered, ‘you’re quite right. Brattle wouldn’t profess to understand it. But Westhampton is hardly eight miles away. There ought to be pawnbrokers in a big place like that who could put you right.’

‘No,’ he replied quickly. ‘In that case I shouldn’t have troubled you. Westhampton happens to be the very place where I’m staying. We have walked over from there this morning. I read last night in the local paper an account of your excavations at the villa, and, as I happen to have dug a bit myself at Herculaneum, I thought I might do worse than offer you a colleague’s services at the villa in return for your help in my dilemma. You have seen my book on the *Suburbs of Pompeii?*’ he added diffidently.

‘Not yet, unfortunately,’ I said, with an uneasy feeling that Sir Robert Stacke’s agent had hauled me into a false position. ‘I shall read it with interest now that I know the author.’

‘It was published last year, in Milan,’ he said, speaking more freely. ‘I have a copy at Westhampton.’

I confess to having felt more than a little pleased at being thus made free of the brother-

THE ICE

hood of savants; and, also, to having felt more than a little ashamed of the churlish suspiciousness with which I had received my learned brother Canuto. I tried to make amends.

'First of all,' I began, 'let me say how sorry I am that I welcomed you here so scurvily.'

'Don't speak of it,' he said heartily. 'It was a mistake.'

Taking rapid stock of him as he sat beside me, I decided that Canuto would be fairly cheap at any thing not exceeding ten pounds. It was possible he was an impostor; but in that case a peep at his security would put me on my guard. On the other hand, he had an open and honest way; and, of the two risks, I preferred the risk of being cheated by a sharper to the risk of letting a scholar and a gentleman starve in a strange land. Besides, although I had never before coveted enrolment in the list of world-known antiquaries, the prospect suddenly became attractive, and, even if my ten pounds never came back in coin of the realm, it would not be money thrown away. So I continued:

'About your difficulty. If it isn't a great one, perhaps we can get over it.'

'It is great and it is small,' Canuto replied. 'So far as money goes, all I need is four pounds. The trouble is, what will you think of the security?'

With a swift glance I took him in once more. Plainly, he was not a swindler of any common type. And I could afford to lose eighty shillings.



VIRGINIE

‘As for security,’ I said, ‘shew it or not, just as you please. In any case, I will contrive to find you four pounds.’

‘Thanks, thanks! A hundred thanks,’ he cried warmly. ‘I shan’t forget this kindness to a perfect stranger. But business is business. I won’t take a penny of your money unless I may leave the security in your hands.’

‘Have your way, then,’ I said. ‘Where is it?’

‘It is at Westhampton, at my lodgings.’

This did not sound encouraging. I fully expected him to ask for half the money on account while he went back to Westhampton for the treasure.

‘That’s a pity,’ I said, less affably.

‘It is and it isn’t,’ he answered promptly. ‘My security doesn’t improve by being dragged about. I beg you to come and see it. If you don’t like it, the deal is off; and, in that case, if I haven’t done any good by coming here this morning, at least I shan’t have done any harm.’

So much mystery made me suspicious.

‘Westhampton’s a long way off,’ I said. ‘It will take the whole day.’

‘But you have a car?’ he demanded.

I started. My car was housed in a rustic shed, and there were no outward and visible signs of its existence.

‘How did you know that?’ I demanded in turn.

‘I smelt it. I could pick up the scent any-

THE ICE

where. If the car is in going order, you can be back here for lunch.'

'I can and I can't,' I retorted, using against him his own pet formula. 'But tell me plainly, what is it you want me to see?'

'It is a model for a statue,' he answered, easily and candidly. 'The subject is "Fame Asleep." In my opinion it is, beyond all comparison, the finest work of Giambattista Storno, of Torino. With four pounds I can redeem it from the grasp of my landlady, to whom I owe a week's rent, and I can go straight to London where a purchaser is awaiting its arrival. By this time tomorrow morning your money will be back in your pocket, and I shall come to carry the model away.'

For two or three seconds I hesitated. But I was weary of the monotonous operations at the villa and of the increasing friction with Sir Robert Stacke's agent, who believed that every postherd was a find of incalculable value. Brattle suddenly seemed stale.

'Very well,' I said, 'we'll get out the car.'

Canuto's man shewed himself handy. But when I tried on him a sample or two from my little stock of Italian, his face darkened and he grunted.

'Nicolo doesn't understand you,' said Canuto, apologising. 'Sometimes I can't understand him myself. He comes from some bandits' nest or other in a corner of Calabria. I often think he's the very picture of the Italian villain, with a long knife, whom one meets in your English



VIRGINIE

novels. Yet butter won't melt in Nicolo's mouth.'

I locked up the shed and the bungalow, and we were soon pounding through dust and glare towards the stark forest of ships' masts rising over Westhampton.

CHAPTER II

As we tooted a devious way through the children playing in the mean suburbs of Westhampton, I began to ask myself questions. Was I an infallible reader of human nature, rightly giving way to a generous impulse, or was I simply a fool? From one point of view, what Canuto had said about bandits with long knives ought to have made fear ridiculous. But, somehow, I wished Canuto had not said it.

Having asked the Italian for his address, which turned out to be in a street I had never heard of, I made up my mind to run no risks with the car. Accordingly, we descended at the Old Blue Posts in North Bridge Street.

'Are you leaving the car here?' asked Canuto, disappointed.

'Yes,' I said. 'It's better. I can't leave it standing outside your place.'

'If we come to terms,' he answered, 'you'll want the car to take the model away.'

'It will be easy to bring it round,' I said.

'All right,' he agreed, in his usual easy tone.

'It isn't far. I'm ready.'

Canuto's lodgings were in a faded, characterless



VIRGINIE

street of bluish-brick houses with shallow bay-windows. His door was opened by a dejected young woman of respectable appearance. Nicolo left us and entered the house by a side gate leading to the back yard. Canuto led me into a small sitting-room which was dim without being cool.

‘Credentials first!’ he said, smiling. And, taking a book from the table, he opened it at the title-page and placed it in my hands. The book was *I Sobborgi di Pompeii*, by Luca Maurizio Canuto. While I was turning over the leaves, he fished up a bundle of papers from his breast-pocket and chose out two or three letters.

‘Credentials be hanged!’ I answered, feeling ashamed of my wariness and curtness at the hotel. ‘This book looks most tempting. I spell out Italian rather lamely, but I would like to borrow it for to-night.’

‘If you will keep it,’ he said, looking pleased, ‘you will do me an honour.’ He turned back to the fly-leaf, filled a pen with ink, and added, ‘I know your surname only.’

‘Lionel Barrison is my full name,’ I told him.

In a small but flourishing hand he wrote: ‘To Lionel Barrison, from Luca Canuto, in gratitude and admiration.’

‘Leave it to dry,’ he said, cutting short my thanks. ‘I will wrap it up afterwards. And now, will you forgive me if I eat my breakfast before we get to business? It took my legs longer carrying me to Brattle than it has taken

THE ICE

your car to bring me back; and I am indecently hungry.'

I began to upbraid myself aloud for not having offered hospitality at Brattle; but he would not hear me out.

'The habits of our countries are different,' he said, touching the bell. 'You broke your own fast early, and you couldn't be expected to think that any civilised being would want to be eating at ten o'clock in the morning. Still, I hope the ride may have given you enough appetite to make you join me in the little I have. Let my late breakfast be your early luncheon.'

I tried to protest; but the dejected young woman had already answered the bell, and Canuto bade her bring an extra plate and glass. She departed without enthusiasm; and I began to understand why her needy lodger had been cast down when I decided to leave the car at the Old Blue Posts. My fine green chariot standing at the gate in charge of Nicolo would have had a tonic effect upon Canuto's languishing credit.

Breakfast began with a dish of tender dark olives, a few flakes of marinated tunny-fish and two slices of piebald salame. It was prolonged by a heaped-up bowl of maccaroni with tomato sauce. Half a litre of Chianti in a straw-covered flask completed the meal.

'I can recommend it,' said my host, taking the flask in one hand and my glass in the other. 'It is Montepulciano.'

poisoned, of course. If you don't believe me, read your English novels. So now we sit together.'

'You are hard on our poor novelists,' I

said so hard as they are on my poor countenance. He said he, pushing the flask towards me, which enlivened the next twenty minutes with a burlesque of certain popular romances. After we had drunk our coffee, which Canuto had brought at the table, we lit up our evil little cigarettes made from dark tobacco. A moment later Canuto came into the room, and sat down, with a word, to consume the remains of

'I'd better be going,' Canuto said. He said I followed.

He passed through the kitchen to a neglected garden, in which stood a large wooden structure. In better days the house must have belonged to a well-to-do amateur, who had left souvenirs of his taste to him in the shapes of sun-dials, arbours, and a staff, and an empty fountain. Canuto

THE ICE

imitation of a draped cenotaph in a church on All Souls' Day. The first glimpse of it was uncanny.

'Come, I will shew you. Nicolo has made it ready,' said Canuto briskly. He led me forward and flung the tarpaulin aside.

I cried out.

On the rough bier lay a block of crystal-clear ice, about six feet long. And, frozen solidly inside, was the recumbent figure of a woman.

Canuto burst out laughing.

'Quite a compliment to poor Giambattista Storno,' he chuckled. 'Why, you jumped as if the lady was alive!'

'On the contrary,' I said. 'I jumped as if the lady was dead.'

'She is not dead. She is immortal,' said Canuto grandly. 'Ideal beauty is indestructible. But you have hardly looked.'

I peered through the crystalline shroud and gazed upon the form of a beautiful girl. A robe, or rather a drapery of flame-coloured silk was wound round her so that it covered her bosom, leaving her arms and neck bare. Below her waist its folds were full and free and graceful. Her long black hair hung streaming over her left shoulder, and her head was garlanded with bay-leaves intertwined, as if by an afterthought, with poppies. In her listless hand she held a long, slender, silver trumpet, so long that it extended some inches beyond her sandalled feet. The sight moved me strangely.



VIRGINIE

‘It represents “Fame Asleep,”’ explained Canuto, beaming with pride.

‘So you told me before,’ I said, annoyed at the interruption.

‘But is it not magnificent?’

‘It is magnificent, but it is not art,’ I answered, dragging myself away with an effort. ‘It is too close an imitation of some particular model. Art is concerned with the universal.’

‘I call it wonderful.’

‘So do I. But there is too much of this sort of wonderfulness among your Italian sculptors to-day. They are prodigiously clever and accomplished; but — don’t take offence — they are too often vulgar. You call this Ideal Beauty. I call it merely a very clever copy of some very pretty real woman. To me it is less like a statue than a corpse.’

He laughed again.

‘You remind me,’ he said, ‘of the clerk at West-hampton station. Yesterday, when I tried to despatch it to London, ice and all, I maintained that it ought to go at a cheap rate, the same as fish. “Meaning a blooming mermaid, I suppose?” said the clerk. “Not me! If it goes at all, you’ll have to pay for it as a blooming corpse.”’

I could not join in Canuto’s merriment. The chilliness, which had been pleasant on first stepping out of the sunlight, was too tomb-like; and, although the statue fascinated me powerfully, my brains kept pointing out that the less

THE ICE

I had to do with the affair the better. What if this was the body of a real woman, newly done to death by foul play?

'The wonder to me is,' I said, looking at the Italian closely, 'that the clerk at the station wasn't a bit upset. What should he know about sculptor's models? And why is the thing frozen hard in a block of ice?'

'Surely you don't think it's a model in baked clay?' asked Canuto, opening his eyes so wide that I felt ashamed of my ignorance. 'It's wax.'

'Wax?' I echoed.

'Yes, wax. And even in foggy England your sun can melt wax in this weather. My duty to Storno is to deliver his model in the form of a sleeping maiden, not as a hundredweight of wax candle-drippings.'

'It's something fresh, isn't it?' I asked, still watching his face, 'for a serious artist to throw himself away on mere wax-works?'

'No, it is not,' he answered decidedly. 'Evidently you have never been to the museum of Lille to look at one of the finest things in all France. Five hundred years ago, better artists than any you have in England to-day were not ashamed of their skill in cero-plastics. And what about Verrocchio's and Orsino's statue of Lorenzo de' Medici, with silk garments and wax feet and wax hands and a wax face? What about ——'

'You're quite right,' I said hastily. 'But it isn't usual nowadays.'



VIRGINIE

'It is and it isn't,' he replied confidentially. 'I don't mind letting you into a secret. To make a wax figure for a show and to put one's name to it would be to lose caste. But, so long as there's no fear of the secret leaking out, many a struggling young sculptor is glad to earn a few pounds by modelling a wax king, or a wax admiral, or a wax murderer.'

'That's interesting,' I said. 'All the same, I'm mightily surprised that the railway people didn't take fright and lodge you in gaol on suspicion.'

'To be candid, they did and they didn't. For a few minutes after the clerk saw poor Fame, there was such a row that I thought he would split her wax ears and wake her up. He only quietened down when I shewed him what I'm just going to shew you. Read this.'

He handed me two of the letters which he had drawn from his pocket in the house. The first letter, bearing the Turin postmark and signed by Giambattista Storno, advised Canuto of the despatch, via Genoa and Westhampton, of an aluminium case containing 'Fame Asleep.' Storno authorised Canuto to retain, for commission and expenses, twenty-five per cent. of the moneys payable by the purchaser. The second letter was written on a sheet of fine handmade paper, headed in simple blue type with the words, 'Tussaud's, London, N. W.' It confirmed an older agreement to pay forty guineas for 'Fame Asleep' on delivery, and urged speed.

THE ICE

'This is good enough for me,' I said. 'But what you've got to do is to take the thing straight off to Tussaud's. You shall have your four pounds. Or, rather, we'd better make it a round five.'

'Exactly,' he replied, with his bantering chuckle.

'I go away with the blooming mermaid and the blooming five pounds and I never come back. As for yourself, you sit at home and wish you'd believed the novels.'

The jest was getting stale, and it annoyed me.

'Our novelists have some silly notions,' I retorted, 'but not one of them is so silly as your own belief that England is a nation of shopkeepers where one man will only help another on deposited security. Besides, I've the right to lose five pounds if it pleases me.'

'And I,' he rejoined proudly, 'have the right to refuse that you shall lose five pounds on my account. I don't expect to be shot to-night in Hatton Garden, or to have my throat cut in Soho. But accidents will happen. And, as I've said all along, business is business. What I proposed and what I stick to is that you lend me four pounds — not five — until to-morrow morning, on security which you have been so kind as to approve. Once free from the poor people who let these lodgings and once in London on my old beat, I can immediately put my hand on what little money I need. I should reach Brattle to-morrow at eleven o'clock. Besides,' he added with a sudden brightening of the eyes, 'I imagine



VIRGINIE

we shall have to go back to Brattle in any case. I don't expect you're carrying four golden sovereigns in the pockets of your flannels.'

This was true. I had no more money about me than would pay the Old Blue Posts. And, although common prudence cried out loudly against the whole transaction, my heart leapt at the thought that, for a few hours, the enchanting lady would be all mine.

'It'll make a nice mess of the car,' I grumbled, with a last attempt at resistance.

'It'll do nothing of the kind,' he said. 'Look at this case.'

The aluminium box was ingeniously contrived. One side fell forward to admit the block of ice, the hinges and joints having internal shields of pleated waterproof canvas. There was also a rough wooden packing-case into which the aluminium shell, swaddled in canvas, could be pushed endways.

'Clever,' I exclaimed admiringly.

'It's the usual thing,' Canuto answered carelessly. 'That box will go backwards and forwards for a lifetime. Anyhow, it's worth four pounds. But damn boxes. Is it a bargain?'

Discretion, for half a second, got the upper hand and I was on the point of saying 'No.' But my eye fell upon the poppy-covered tresses and lily-white feet of poor lonely Fame, sleeping her icy sleep, and I answered boldly:

'Yes.'

THE ICE

'Nicolo!' he called, opening the door.

Nicolo was at hand; and, as Canuto put it, we soon had her ladyship well and truly packed.

'I'll go and wrap up that little book,' said Canuto as we came out of the studio. He locked the door and gave me the key. 'Nicolo will go with you for the car,' he continued. 'Keep the key, of course. Otherwise I shall change the pretty little girl for the mangled remains of some hideous old dowager whom I have just stabbed and throttled and poisoned to gain possession of her wealth. We Italians always do.'

'Never overdo satire,' I said. 'You're squeezing a fairly good lemon a great deal too dry.'

He bowed comically and let us out into the street by the side door.

Nicolo and I did not exchange words. But Nicolo had eyes which did duty for his tongue. His furtive glances searched me and cross-examined me until I abashed him by a steady stare in return.

Twenty minutes later we found Canuto with a small parcel in his hand, leaning against the side door, smoking. He took us straight to the studio; and, waving aside my help, he and Nicolo easily bore out the two hundredweight of Art and Nature and laid poor Fame along the floor of the car.

To my surprise, no landlady appeared to



VIRGINIE

protest against this removal of her debtor's property. I felt a shock of fresh doubts.

'By the way,' I asked, 'if you hauled the thing as far as the station yesterday, why did you bring it back again?'

He slapped his pocket dolefully. 'They insisted on charging it as a fragile work of Art,' he said. 'As fish, I could have paid.'

It was on my tongue's end to enquire about the landlady. But the affair was none of mine. And, in any case, it was too late to change my mind.

CHAPTER III

THE coolest chamber in my bungalow at Brattle was the larder. Long and narrow, like a prison cell, it always struck chilly and dim. Here, on the tiles, we laid Fame to continue her slumbers.

'It's a case of sleeping soundly,' said Canuto, 'when bay-crowned Fame is satisfied with the pantry for her bedroom. By the way, perhaps you'd rather have her out to look at?'

In my secret mind, I had already decided to unpack the figure as soon as the Italians were gone. So I welcomed a chance of having a rough and awkward job done for me.

'Won't it be a lot of trouble dragging her out and putting her in again?' I asked.

'No. Let Nicolo earn his macaroni.'

'The ice will melt before morning,' I added.

'Hardly at all,' he answered, 'so long as you keep her covered. These tiles are set in concrete, and a bucket or two of ice-water won't do them any harm. Besides, it'll cool the milk. I've half a mind to charge you an extra tuppence for a night's loan of a refrigerator.'

Using the wooden box as a bier, within five minutes he had laid out the Sleeping Beauty in state.



VIRGINIE

'Now,' he cried, extending his arms like an Italian tenor and striking a ludicrous attitude of mock despair, 'My beautiful one, my heart's beloved, my star, my goddess, my queen, I must away. Though seas divide us, my heart will beat only for thee. Cupid grant that thy maiden sleep may not lack some kind dream of me. But the hour is striking. Carissima, I must begone. In other words, I must catch the one-twenty-six. Addio.'

I pumped up a laugh. But the surly Nicolo, pushing his master aside almost roughly, scowled darkly at both of us and drew the canvas over the ice.

'You've time for a drink,' I said, as I locked the pantry door. 'What about Moselle and seltzer? The Moselle is rather good.'

'To-morrow,' he answered, 'I will try it, and no doubt I shall find it excellent. But I mustn't delay.'

'It has to be a five-pound note, after all,' I said, 'because I haven't any gold in the house.'

'Very well,' he answered, taking the note. 'It can't be helped. Thousands of thanks. Farewell till to-morrow morning.'

'Good-bye,' I said, leading the way to the front door. 'But wait a moment! You're forgetting about that book you're giving me.'

He felt in his wide pockets, one by one. Then he hunted among the things on the hall table.

'You certainly brought it into the house,' I said. 'I saw it in your hand.'

'My usual carelessness,' he replied, looking vexed. 'Still, if I brought it in, you'll find it.'

THE ICE

Most likely I laid it down in the pantry. Shall I go and look?’

‘No need,’ I said. ‘You’ll miss your train.’

‘Farewell, best friend,’ he said warmly and openly, with his most likeable smile, ‘I shall never forget.’

‘Thanks for the book,’ I answered, shaking his outstretched hand. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll keep a sharp ear open for her ladyship in case she wakes up and cries.’

‘Your promise eases my paternal heart,’ he cried gaily. ‘Addio.’

‘Addio,’ I shouted, as he and Nicolo passed out through the gate into the bright road.

The bungalow seemed weirdly silent and gloomy as I shut out the songs of the birds and the distant hum of the town and the lively sunshine. Indeed, I will confess that it required a distinct effort to unlock the pantry door. And when I entered the cell which the ice had already made grave-cold, I could not repress a shiver. It flashed upon me that the letter from Tussaud’s might be a forgery, and that the document from Giambattista Storno might easily have been concocted and posted by Canuto himself before he left Turin.

With a great rally of spirit and will, I thrust doubts aside and drew the rough pall from the bier. As I did so a knob of ice broke off and fell to the ground, leaving the end of the long trumpet exposed. I touched the cold metal with my hand and divined that it was pure silver.



VIRGINIE

Now that I could look at the figure without distraction, it enchained me more than ever. As an only child, I had seen few girls and young women at home; and, since my father's death, my way had somehow lain among blonde and doll-like creatures who did not attract me. Hence, at twenty-two, I offered for the sport of the gods the spectacle of an ardent lover who had never been in love. I wanted love. I believed all the finest things that the robusiter romances and major poets had written in its praise. But I had never in my life walked and talked with a woman who could excite it.

Gazing down through the misty ice, I felt sure that my words to Canuto had been just. Here, under my eyes, lay no true artist's embodiment of ideal loveliness. It was an amazingly life-like — or, rather, death-like — reproduction of a real young girl whom Storno had chanced upon for a model. My heart thrilled as I told myself that the real young girl, the beautiful original of the statue, was at that very moment working and singing in some village of Piedmont, or braiding her black hair with real poppies, or sleeping through the Italian afternoon even more sweetly and languorously than her waxen counterpart was sleeping through long nights and days of Arctic cold. A wild plan took hurried shape in my brain. I resolved that, when Canuto came back for his security, I would extract Storno's address and track the beauty till I could gaze on her with my own eyes.

THE ICE

The bell of the telephone in the hall resounded through the house. It had only rung once before in six weeks, and its loud abruptness made me start.

'Who's there?' I asked, two seconds later.

'A man with five pounds,' replied an unmistakable voice.

'You mean it's Canuto?'

'It is and it isn't.'

'Where are you?'

'At a call-office. That leaves four pounds nineteen and tenpence.'

'What's up?'

'Nothing and everything. Did you find that book?'

'Not yet. It wasn't in the pantry.'

'Is Ma'amselle squealing?'

'No.'

'She will soon. I say, Barrison?'

'Yes? I'm here.'

'About that book. I've just remembered. I left it on the hall floor, under the hat-stand.'

'Funny place.'

'Isn't it? But Barrison?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Begin reading it at once, there's a good fellow. I've got reasons. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' I said, bewildered. And, turning round, I discerned the corner of a parcel barely protruding below the sticks and umbrellas.

As soon as the parcel was in my hand, I knew that it contained more than a book. I laid it on the hall table and, cutting the string, un-

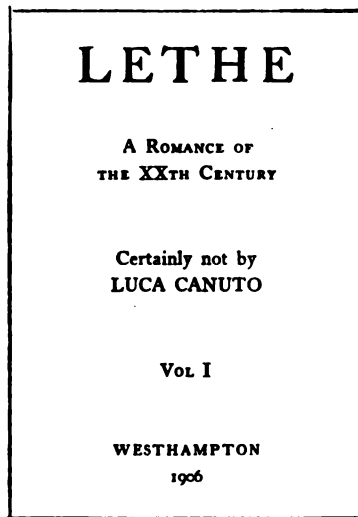


VIRGINIE

wrapped a thin note-book in red covers, a large pill-box, and two glass-stoppered bottles. But I looked in vain for the presentation-copy of *I Sobborgi di Pompeii*.

In the ampler light of the dining-room I set about examining this unexpected collection. The pill-box held a dark and exceedingly fragrant powder. Of the liquids in the bottles, one was deep blue and the other amber. I turned for the key of the mystery to the note-book.

Gummed firmly to the red cover was a common white label, inscribed in red ink, with the single word 'Lethe.' Inside, the writing that met my eye was Canuto's, spaced out like the title-page of a printed book. I read:



THE ICE

I turned to the last page of all, which was blank save for the words: 'All Rights Reserved. Price Four Pounds. To be continued in Our Next.'

For a moment the affair appeared to be merely another of Canuto's too elaborate jests, and I smiled pityingly at his misplaced industry. But the smile did not survive my reading of the second page. Here is an unabridged transcription of the words I read:

Do you want to know what it feels like to be a murderer?

If you don't, you'd better thaw the Frozen Lady at once. Otherwise the railway people will charge her as a corpse.

By the time you peruse these lines, she will have been frozen nearly three hours. Nicolò put her in while you were honouring my poor Montepulciano.

Don't dawdle. Knock off the head end of the ice with a mallet. Pull her out gently by the shoulders. She won't break.

Lay her down flat on a couch or bed in your sunniest room, out of the glare. Keep on burning the powder, a salt-spoonful at a time, under her nostrils. Pour in the blue liquid (I mean the blue potion!) as soon as you can get it down her throat. When her breathing is normal, give her the amber elixir. By the way, you don't need to draw a ring on the floor or to say the Greek alphabet backwards.

After the amber elixir, let her sleep in absolute silence at least three hours.



VIRGINIE

For the rest, take note of two points. She is mine, not yours. When it suits me, I shall come to redeem her, with four pounds and interest at five per cent. Also, take note that she is purer than a lily as well as more lovely than a rose.

Her name (so far as you are concerned) is Lethe, because she has forgotten everything. Don't worry the poor child with questions. Her mind reflects her past no more than a river in flood reflects the buds on the poplars.

I am not an Italian. Certainly I am not Canuto. I believe the real Canuto is an unrepresentable person with two hairs, one tooth, and no soap; but I have never seen him in my life.

Don't raise a hue and cry after me. If you do, you will make more trouble for yourself than for me. You won't find me till I am willing to be found. Besides, think of poor Lethe, who hasn't exactly had a happy life up to this present.

Joking apart, you are one of the right sort, and it consoles me to know that my security is in honourable hands. Expect me when you see me.

No time for more. I am scribbling this while you and Nicolo are bringing round the car.

One more point. Lethe is healthy, and good-tempered. You won't find her troublesome. But in no circumstances let her eat anchovies. They make her frightfully ill.

I dashed the book down angrily on the table and tramped up and down the room. I had been fooled as easily as the village idiot at every point. Canuto, the sham Canuto, must have

THE ICE

been studying me and my habits for days, or perhaps weeks. And he had discovered that the learned antiquary of Brattle was simply a good-natured young fool with plenty of money and hardly a grain of worldly sense. In my humiliation and disgust I cursed him only less heartily than I cursed myself.

What was to be done? I had allowed myself to be deeply involved in an affair of which it was impossible to foresee the conclusion or even the second chapter. Canuto might not return for months or years. Worst of all, when he did return, he was certain to explode more bombs in his track.

Obviously the common-sense course was to ring up the Brattle police-inspector and the Brattle solicitor, and to make a clean breast of the whole transaction. In their presence I could restore the women to consciousness and then hand her over to the cottage-hospital.

'Canuto has mistaken his man,' I muttered, walking up to the telephone. But an inward voice instantly replied: 'Canuto has done nothing of the kind.'

I leaned against the cool wall of the hall, and suffered the inward voice to go on talking.

'Come away from the telephone,' it said sternly. 'This isn't the sort of girl to be harried from pillar to post by a pack of policemen and reporters and workhouse matrons. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Do you want the gutter-rags to overflow with the Brattle Mystery?'



VIRGINIE

Do you want the newsboys yelling, "Village Horror: Woman Found in a Block of Ice?" Do you want to see snapshots of the bungalow and of yourself in the worst of the Sunday papers? No. You don't. Besides, you're not such a fool as to think the police will believe you — especially if you pull her out dead. And how do you know she isn't wax after all, and that this isn't a parting joke of Canuto's? In any case the one thing to do is to get her out at once and see if she's wax or flesh, alive or dead.'

It had happened before in my solitary life that my second and better thoughts had spoken to my conscience with all the clean-cut insistence of some external monitor. But, this time, the inward voice was so imperative that it roused me like a woman's cry for help. With half-a-dozen strides I was back in the pantry.

She was lying exactly as I had left her.

The ice at her head projected so far that it was safe to strike a good blow. Picking up a small cask, I smote the block from the right-hand side. To my amazement, a great chunk of ice crashed to the floor at the first stroke, and a petal from one of Fame's poppies fell fluttering after it.

Whether she was wax model or corpse or living woman I knew not. But I saw in a flash that Fame had not been frozen into solid ice after all. She was lying in a kind of flattened glass tube or shell thinly coated with real ice.

THE ICE

It was half a minute before I recovered my wits. Then, in rapid succession I made three discoveries. The end of the block had fallen at a single blow simply because the egg-shaped head of the glass tube was made in a separate piece and was held in its place by nothing stronger than the outer skin of ice. At the other extremity the silver trumpet had been open to the air all the time, although the orifice had been concealed by the knob of ice which tumbled out when I first dragged off the pall. And inlets for air had been cunningly contrived, both in the aluminium box and in the wooden packing-case.

I laid my hand reverently upon her smooth brow. It was deathly chill. But it was not wax. Quick or dead, this was the beautiful body of a woman.

My heart beat wildly as I pulled my hand away. Then I took her by her cold, firm, white shoulders, as cold and firm and white as new-hewn marble, and drew her gently towards me until I could encircle her waist. A moment later I held her wholly in my arms. She was as rigid and frigid as a statue, but as light to hold as a child. And, somehow, I knew that though she was cold and stark, it was not with the coldness and starkness of death.

Her head was on my shoulder, her hair touched my cheek. And, as I gazed into her sleeping face, the trumpet slipped from her grasp and rang on the ice as bright and silvery as a wedding-bell.

CHAPTER IV

I LAID Lethe upon a broad, low couch in the sunniest of the three bedrooms, and knelt down at her side. The beatings of her heart and pulse were faint and few, but they were undeniable. So far, Canuto had told the truth.

Striking six or seven honest English matches all at once, I held them heads downwards till they were well affare. Then I blew them out and scattered their glowing charcoal upon a brass ash-tray. With my other hand I flung on a big pinch of the dark, pleasant-smelling powder.

At first nothing happened. But after two or three seconds the powder began to sizzle and buzz, as if it were alive with innumerable, invisible, infinitesimal bees. Then a few tiny globules of intensely blue fire sprang clear of the charred wood, and flitted hither and thither more nimbly than glow-worms. At last there was a leap of blue flame, and the air was laden with smoke and fragrance. Ten thousand roses and gilly-flowers and violets could not have exhaled so copious and delicious a perfume. Yet the scent was not heady or overpowering; it was piquant and revivifying, like a sea-breeze.

As the heat of the match-stalks died down the

THE ICE

powder burned less fiercely. But it was inflammable enough to keep itself alight and to set fire to the fresh pinches which I threw into the dish from time to time. Its effect upon me was so exhilarating that it was with difficulty I remained upon my knees, holding the censer so that the puffs of vapour clouded Lethe's face. I felt as buoyant as a bird, as strong as a giant, as eager as a prairie fire.

But I stuck to my post. Ten minutes passed. In those minutes, with the fumes rising all the time to my brain, I believed that I could have walked on the waves, scaled the heavens, plucked out the stars. But I had to be content with kneeling on a polished floor, holding parlour fireworks in a sixpenny ash-tray.

At length I had my reward. Her lips parted. And I heard a moan, or a little cry — a cry as soft as a young dove's. A minute later she moaned again, louder and more painfully.

I poured the blue liquid into a narrow glass, forced asunder her cold lips and white teeth, and succeeded in sending it, little by little, down her throat. Almost immediately her breast heaved slowly under my eyes, and she began to breathe. Then the moaning recommenced — a rapid, terror-stricken, agonising moaning, like the moanings of nightmare when the sleeper feels himself chained hand and foot, while foul shapes of horror bend over him and grin into his face, and pluck with bony fingers or beasts' claws at his eyes. My heart ached and bled at the sight.




VIRGINIE

To see her suffer and not to be able to comfort her made me understand how much she had already become to me. Excepting a few moments at Westhampton, and a few minutes in the pantry after Canuto and Nicolo went away, the three hours since I first set eyes on her had been crowded with suspicions, and jests, and doubts, and fears, and alarms. Yet I felt as if I had known her and treasured her all my life long, and her sufferings were my own.

It was nearly half-an-hour before the short, sharp moanings ceased. Evidently Nicolo had employed some curious drug as well as the numbing cold of the ice to bind his victim in her profound and death-like trance. But her vitality triumphed at last. The drug had run its evil course, and the torrid heat of the July afternoon fought steadily on against the cruel cold. Without opening her eyes, she tried to turn her face towards the light. I placed a cushion under her head, and her breathing became deep and regular and free. But her cheeks were still as pale as death.

Held up in its phial against the sunlight, the amber elixir glowed like molten gold. When I withdrew the stopper, and moistened my finger with a single drop, I found it tasted and smelt like yellow Chartreuse, but far stronger, and with a bitter after-taste. As for quantity, there was about four times as much as one takes in an ordinary glass of Chartreuse.

I hesitated. It seemed a great dose. But



THE ICE

Canuto was, after all, my only guide. So I propped the unresisting head against my shoulder, and persevered until she had swallowed the last drop.

The amber liquid, like the blue, did its work as swiftly and surely as a magician's potion. I have never seen the rosy sunrise incarnadine the ice-pure Jungfrau, but I saw as wondrous and gracious a sight when the long-pent floods of warm life suddenly broke their barriers and coursed through the veins of the pale, sweet lady who lay against my heart. Her cheeks flushed to the pinkness of a pale pink rose. Even her neck, and shoulders, and arms, and feet seemed to be blushing faintly. From head to foot, in all her body, she had passed from death unto life. I drew myself gently away, and, with a deep sigh, she sank back upon the pillow peacefully asleep.



CHAPTER V

THE powder was all burned, the potions, amber and blue, were all drunk, and Canuto's instructions had been exhausted. From the moment of her sinking back upon the cushion the Frozen Lady was on my hands to honour, and cherish, and lodge, and feed, and clothe according to my unaided discretion.

On striking a balance between the pros and cons, I felt thankful that for six weeks I had been living the simple life, without servants. To look after Lethe by myself would be exceedingly awkward; but to explain her to a housekeeper, or a cook-general, or even a charwoman, would be impossible. I shuddered to think of what Brattle would have said and done if a chattering domestic had seen Lethe unpacked; and I marvelled greatly at the skill with which Canuto had conveyed her, unseen and unsuspected, to my care.

In several respects I could not have had a better place than the bungalow in which to wrestle with my difficulties. Originally the one building had been divided into two dwellings — a pair of semi-detached rural flats, so to speak, each with its own front door and bathroom and kitchen.



THE ICE

But a few months before I came into possession the two had been thrown into one. By removing the partition between the two entrance-halls or passages a modern lounge-hall had been formed, about twelve feet square. The two kitchens had also been thrown together, making quite a noble room, with a fireplace at each end. There was a gas-cooker in one corner, and, to reward myself for giving up the troublesome luxury of servants, I had laid in such a stock of labour-saving appliances as could not be paid for with a year of a housekeeper's wages. Mrs. Hipkins, the wife of one of my diggers, came two mornings a week and cleaned the rooms, but with this exception I worked the place alone.

I decided that Lethe should have sole possession of what had been the western flat, and that I would occupy the eastern. The entrance-hall, the kitchen, and the garden would be common ground, but in all other respects my guest would practically have a house of her own.

Fortunately the western rooms had been so little used that they were in faultless order. I began to plan the dinner to which Lethe should sit down as soon as she awoke. In the larder there was a wide choice of ready-made French soups in bottles. There were plenty of new-laid eggs for an omelette. A cold fowl and a small boiled ham had been delivered just after breakfast by Griggs, the excellent, old-fashioned Brattle pastry-cook. The garden would provide a salad, a separate dish of green peas in butter, and a



VIRGINIE

heaped-up bowl of strawberries. As for wines, I had none of the growths of Italy save a fierce and unseasonable Vesuvio. But I was well stocked with the dainty wines of the Moselle, with lively French clarets, red and white, with sound and hearty Burgundies, and even with a great year of Portuguese Collares. As there was a lady in the case, the dinner would be weak in sweets, and I had half a mind to telephone for a supply. But on second thoughts I remembered that a person who had spent the morning being refrigerated, and drugged, and jolted, and fumigated, might do worse than avoid cream horns and mokas until another day.

What would she think, and say, and do when she came to herself? What colour would her eyes be? Would she turn out to be a proud young dame or a simple village maiden? Would she speak English, or French, or Italian, or Roumanian, or what? What would she say when she saw me? Would she scream and try to run away? And how should I make myself known to her?

These, and a dozen others, were questions I could not answer. But they exercised my thoughts agreeably as I watched the Sleeping Beauty's quiet slumber. I even began to picture her sitting down with me to the dinner I would so temptingly prepare. But a sudden thought crashed through my dreams.

Where were her clothes?

I sat down by the window, and, being only

THE ICE

twenty-two, I positively blushed. So long as she was Fame, a mere statue in the ideal world of art, and so long as she had lain in my arms as chill and stiff as sculptor's marble, she had seemed no more undraped than were my plaster-casts of the masterpieces of antiquity. But now, since she had quickened into a faintly-flushed and gently-breathing woman, the case was different. To stand staring at her in a situation at which all her pride and modesty would revolt, was to take a bounder's advantage of her wrongs and misfortunes. I stole on tip-toe out of the room, and deliberated at large in the hall.

The comic side of the affair presented itself to me so brazenly that I almost laughed outright. I suppose that even the most domesticated of husbands would hardly have felt himself master of such a situation, but in my case the oddity was beyond words. I, who had never boasted so much as a sister: I, who hardly knew the name of a single garment that women wear, save a skirt, and a bodice, and a blouse, and a cloak, and a muff, and a hat, had been picked out by Fate to walk into a draper's shop, past all the tittering 'young ladies,' and to choose raiment for a pretty young woman from crown to toe.

It had to be faced. It could not even be postponed until to-morrow. Lethe's sleep had become so normal that she would be ravenous for her dinner. It was true that a banquet, with Lethe in her present costume and with the bay-leaves still wreathing her hair, would have a fine,



VIRGINIE

classical flavour, especially if I served the soup in Samian bowls from the villa, and pledged her in one of my Etruscan cups brimming with rude Vesuvio. But even if I had desired such arrangements myself, I could hardly depend upon Lethe to agree with me. Neither could I expect her to wake up calmly, and to take her new surroundings, her host included, so coolly for granted that I could treat her as an invalid, and serve her with breast of chicken and a dozen strawberries in bed.

No. It had to be faced, and I faced it. But I could not face it in Brattle, where everybody revered me as a unique young sage, supernaturally proof against all the follies of youth, and especially the folly of love. I knew the spiritual and intellectual populace of Brattle well enough to foresee that, if I bought Lethe a pair of silk stockings at half-past three, the bungalow would be besieged by half-past five.

I had seen a huge shop in Westhampton, which appeared to contain more overclothing and underclothing than all the women in the town would be able to wear in the course of their natural lives. In the car I could get to Westhampton and back, allowing thirty or forty minutes for the shopping, in less than two hours. And Lethe would not wake up for two hours and three-quarters.

Despite the heat, I made every door and window in the house secure. Then I ran out the car and got quickly away. In Brattle High Street I called at the bank, and drew out thirty

THE ICE

pounds, chiefly in gold. The clock of Brattle church struck a quarter past three as the bank door swung behind me, and I rushed into West-hampton market-place at twenty-five minutes to four. Speed limits are all very well in their way, but they can claim no natural connection with men who have adorable young creatures lying on couches at home, with nothing but flimsy doors and cheap glass window-panes to wall them off from a wicked world.

Outside Thycke and Thynne's, the chief West-hampton drapers, my car commanded respect. A jaded commissionaire, in an absurdly hot red and gold livery, brightened at the sight of me, and ran to open the door. Just inside the shop entrance a shop-walker — an odious, frock-coated beauty-man with waxed moustaches — met me fawningly, and purred:

'What department?'

'Ladies' clothes,' I said, with a fine air of feeling thoroughly at home.

A pale, rather pretty girl at the cash desk giggled outright. The shopwalker destroyed her mirth with a single glance.

'Certainly, sir,' he said briskly. 'We supply ladies' requisites in all departments. Costumes? Hosiery? Millinery? Gloves? Lace? Umbrellas?'

'Yes,' I said; 'that's what I want.'

'Umbrellas forward,' he sang out, addressing the dimmest and furthest recesses of the shop.

'No, no,' I said; 'you've misunderstood me.'



VIRGINIE

‘No umbrellas to-day?’ he asked, half pleadingly, half reproachfully. And to a weedy youth who emerged obediently from the shade he said, tartly, ‘A mistake, Mr. Topkins.’

The weedy youth faded away.

‘I shall want an umbrella,’ I said, ‘but the point is, I want all these things you say you’ve got.’

He looked at me dubiously, not sure whether I was a practical joker or an escaped lunatic. I plunged in with my carefully-premeditated lie:

‘My sister has come to stay with me, and she’s lost her luggage,’ I said desperately, feeling sure that he detected each and every lie as promptly as I uttered it. ‘I want a few things for her to be going on with.’

‘Lost her luggage? Dear me! how provoking, how annoying, how sad,’ he replied, grinning with glee, and rubbing his hands at the prospect of doing so much business. ‘And how awkward! In the case of a lady,’ he added, gallantly and confidentially, ‘it’s more trying than it would be for you and me, sir — to have nothing except what she stands up in.’

I remembered poor Lethe, and how little she had, even to lie down in.

‘Which department shall I show you first, sir?’ he asked eagerly.

The stock-in-trade seemed to be closing round me like a huge indelicacy. I made another plunge, and named the department which seemed the least bashful.

THE ICE

'Costumes,' I said, savagely.

'Costumes forward,' he sang out, almost affectionately. And, still dancing attendance, he handed me over to a haughty person in a black dress, with a fashion-plate waist, and a train, and an artificial complexion.

The shop-walker addressed the haughty Miss Costumes in tones of sweetness which contrasted ludicrously with his tartness to the weedy Mr. Umbrellas. 'Miss Evans,' he said, 'this gentleman's sister has unfortunately lost all her luggage.'

'How awfully tiresome!' cooed Miss Evans, evidently believing that she was well abreast of the latest and most aristocratic modes of speech.

'Yes, it's a nuisance,' I said.

'What sort of a costume do you require?' she asked.

This floored me.

'Something good,' I answered lamely. 'Not too showy.'

'Of course,' said Miss Costumes, in gentle rebuke. 'But, I mean, do you want a coat and skirt or a complete frock?'

'Oh, a complete frock,' I said hastily; 'it must be complete.'

Two seamstresses, who were altering some garment or other at a side window, tittered audibly, and even Miss Costumes' haughty mouth relaxed at the corners.

'A complete frock,' she said. 'Very well. What style? What colour?'



VIRGINIE

I stood before her, tongue-tied.

'If you tell me what your sister generally wears,' she added, 'it might help.'

I found a moment's melancholy enjoyment in wondering what would happen if I replied that my sister generally wore a strip of yellow silk, a wreath of poppies, and a silver trumpet.

'I'm sorry,' I answered, quite truthfully, 'but I can't describe it.'

'Gentlemen seldom can,' she said archly. 'So long as a lady looks nice, that's all they care about.'

'That and the bill,' chuckled the shop-walker. 'But, perhaps, Miss Evans, if the gentleman would tell us the lady's figure and complexion it might be enough. I assure you, sir,' he went on, turning to me, 'that when it comes to a matter of taste you can't do better than leave yourself in the hands of Miss Evans.'

Miss Evans rewarded him with a gracious smile.

'As the lady isn't here in person,' she said, 'I suppose that's the only thing we can do. I suppose the gentleman's sister will take after him as far as hair goes, and complexion?'

'No, no,' I said hurriedly. 'Not at all. To tell the truth, she's only my half-sister. She has black hair — as black as jet — and she's rather small-made. She looks — I've seen her look awfully well in yellow.'

'I have it,' cried the shop-walker, struck by a bright idea. 'Miss Evans, why not go with this

THE ICE

gentleman, and take ten or a dozen costumes with you? Then the lady can choose for herself.'

'No,' I gasped. 'It's impossible. I live eight miles off — at Brattle.'

'That doesn't matter,' he said cheerfully. 'It'll only take a matter of half-an-hour in the motor car.'

Miss Evans looked at me wistfully. Romance had suddenly descended from heaven and was standing at her side. A hush fell over the humming, rustling shop. From Miss Green, of the Hosiery, to the youngest apprentice in the Gloves, everyone in the place knew that Miss Evans, of the Costumes, was on the point of being taken out in a motor car by a gentleman of obvious wealth and leisure. I felt sure that even Mr. Topkins, of the Umbrellas, was gazing at us from his gloom.

For a moment I weakened. Miss Evans looked so weariful, so stale. The soul which watched me hungrily from her big, tired eyes seemed to plead with me, and to say, 'I am such an unhappy soul, down-trodden and shop-soiled. The firm would call me dear at one and elevenpence three-farthings. But give me a chance. Take me out, just once, for an hour in the blessed sunshine. Take me along the cool lanes, under the arching trees, and say nice things to me, instead of "Costumes Forward!" Please.'

But I hardened my heart. To be exact, I hardened it only against Miss Evans in particular. To salve my conscience, I promised myself that

VIRGINIE

some day, perhaps on August Bank Holiday, I would take out all Thycke & Thynne's people in motor cars for the afternoon. The commissionaire should wear a linen suit and a straw boater, the shop-walker should sit beside Miss Evans, and Mr. Topkins should change hats with the pretty girl at the cash desk, and apply himself without stint to a hamper of beef sandwiches and a case of bottled stout.

'I couldn't think of giving so much trouble,' I said, as cordially as I could. 'Still, there's something in the idea. If I leave a deposit, can't I take a few things on approval by myself, and return what I don't want to-morrow morning?'

The shop-walker hesitated.

'Suppose I leave twenty-five pounds?' I said, to hurry him up.

He jumped.

'See,' I added; 'I'm in a hurry. Here you are. Perhaps you'd better give me a receipt.'

At the sight of the gold he was so much moved that I believe he would not have objected to my clearing out the shop, Miss Evans and all, and carting it away in a pantehnicon.

'What name, sir?' he asked obsequiously. 'And the address?'

'Lionel Barrison,' I answered, 'The Bungalow, Brattle.'

'I beg your pardon,' he said, regarding me with awe; 'but you're not really the gentleman that's digging up heathen idols and golden crowns at Sir Robert Stacke's?'

THE ICE

'That's it,' I replied curtly. 'But about these things for my sister. She doesn't only want costumes.'

'Of course, of course,' he agreed briskly, 'the lady will want hats, gloves, laces, umbrellas.'

'I tell you she wants everything,' I said impatiently. 'Every stitch of her stuff has been lost.'

'I know, I know,' he said. And then he chanted: 'Miss Green — Hosiery forward!'

'Damn it all,' I interrupted, 'we're not going all over it again, are we? If twenty-five pounds only covers the costumes, I'll leave some more money. You're to let me have all my sister is likely to want.'

'The deposit is ample,' he said, with enthusiasm; 'but I should have liked Miss Green to shew you some of our new lines in lace underskirts. We're doing them from fifteen-eleven-three upwards.'

'Fifteen pounds eleven and threepence?' I asked aghast. I was prepared to do the thing handsomely, but the figure staggered me.

'Beg pardon, sir,' he said. 'That's our way of pricing in the drapery. All our lady customers understand it. I mean fifteen shillings and eleven pence three-farthings. But I've just got another good notion. T. & T. make a special line of complete trousseaux, from seven pounds nineteen and sixpence upwards. How will it be if we send you three complete sets on appro.?'

'Do,' I said eagerly.



VIRGINIE

'Miss Green,' he demanded of the Hosiery lady, who had joined us, 'how soon can you manage it?'

'At a push, in one hour,' answered Miss Green.

'Good heavens!' I cried, 'I can't wait an hour.' I pictured Lethe possibly being abducted at that very moment by Canuto, or, worse still, by the unknown persons from whom Canuto was hiding her away.

'You don't need to wait a minute, sir,' said the shop-walker. 'The carrier goes to Brattle every day at five. He has a steam motor van. This is a special order, and we'll make it worth his while to deliver your little lot before six. He shall call to bring away what you don't keep as soon as you send us a card.'

'Do the thing by six, and do it well,' I said, 'and we shan't haggle. I must be off.'

I left the commissionaire apparently trying to look at his own face in a new five-shilling piece, and flew thundering back to Brattle.

CHAPTER VI

NOBODY had stormed the castle. When I reopened the bungalow at five o'clock everything was as I had left it. Lethe had not moved an inch, and it seemed likely that her sleep would be prolonged for hours. I hoped ardently that it might last until Thycke & Thynne's dozen or so of big cardboard boxes could be neatly arranged, without their lids, on Lethe's bedroom floor. It had still to be discovered whether she was not, after all, a child of nature, to whom buttons would mean no more than the bathroom taps. But, after the day's excitements, I resolved not to meet fresh troubles half-way, and I set about the work which I have always loved, whether roughly camping-out or fastidiously at home — the work of preparing an artist's dinner.

To guard against thundering knocks at the hall door by the Westhampton carrier, I sat and shelled the peas in the front garden. It soothed my teased nerves to break open the bright, well-fed pods and to stroke the serried little green orbs into a white bowl. And with soothed nerves I began to have pleasant thoughts.

I reflected that some men are born to adven-



VIRGINIE

tures, and that others go out to seek them. I had belonged neither to the one class nor to the other. But Destiny had suddenly enrolled me among those who have adventures thrust upon them; and, now that I was growing used to it, the prospect pleased me. With a strong arm, and a cool head, and a young heart, and a distressed damsel already on the premises, I felt quite equal to the task of bringing mediæval chivalry up to date. As for the false knight Canuto, and his uncouth squire Nicolo, I mentally took up the challenge they had thrown down. In spite of his mercurial cleverness, Canuto should repent the hour when he reckoned me up as no more than a free-hearted young fool. It had cost him ever so much time, and trouble, and money, and apparatus to get Lethe into my hands, but I swore that, unless he could satisfy me that she was his, and that he would treat her kindly, it should cost him far more to get her out.

Until that day Lethe should be my ward. I glowed at the thought of shielding her, caring for her, having her always near me. My imagination leapt over the intervening complications and difficulties, and I thought of her as entirely lovely and entirely mine to the end of the world.

At a quarter to six the steam van from West-hampton came rumbling and snorting up the road. I met the men at the gate.

‘Name of Barrison?’ they asked.

THE ICE

'Right,' I said. 'You're here in good time.'

'Not 'alf,' declared the elder. 'We've broke the bloomin' record. We wus told the things wus wanted speshul.'

'Don't talk loud,' I said. 'There's an invalid in the house, asleep. Just put the stuff down in the hall as quietly as you can.'

He gave me a delivery-note, and I checked over Thycke & Thynne's thirteen bulky and flimsy boxes as they were borne into the house. When the thirteen had been carried in I took out a pencil to sign the sheet.

'Alf a mo', guv'nor,' said the carter. 'There's two more. 'Ere, 'igher up.' And he laid a broad black thumb on another entry nearer the top of the paper.

'What's all this about?' I asked. 'Barrison? One steel trunk, one lady's hat-box? That makes fifteen. Thycke & Thynne only call it thirteen on their note.'

'This 'ere's a separate lot, guv'nor,' he answered. 'They wus brought by a foreign gent just after dinner. We wus told they wus urgent. And we wus to be sure and give yer this 'ere letter.'

The writing on the envelope was Canuto's. I crushed the thing into my pocket viciously, and told the men to lift the trunk softly into the hall. It was a good, strong, plain case, measuring about three feet by two. The hat-box was a cube, covered with shiny black cloth, and fastened by a broad strap. I signed the receipts, gave the



VIRGINIE

men half-a-sovereign to divide, and gently closed the hall door.

Canuto's letter was short. It ran:

BEST OF BARRISONS,

When you get this I shall be out on the wide blue sea. So will Nicolo.

The accompanying boxes contain poor Lethe's poor little bits of things.

She can dress without a maid.

I hope you will agree, dear friend, that (including packing-case, and complete with all accessories) she is worth four pounds.

I shan't hold you responsible for fair wear and tear.

The key of the trunk is at the bottom of the hat-box.

For want of a better name,

I am still, yours,

CANUTO.

As I unbuckled the hat-box I sullenly prepared myself for fresh surprises. I expected powders, potions, papers — anything save hats. But I was mistaken. The box contained three hats at least. On the top lay a broad-brimmed one of fine, white, limp straw, with poppies and poppy-red silk ribands, either to stream loose or to tie under the chin. I did not look at the others, for the key of the trunk could be seen faintly gleaming at the bottom of the box.

I fitted the key into the trunk lock, and made

THE ICE

sure that it would turn. Then I opened the door of Lethe's room noiselessly, and contrived, with a great effort, to carry the trunk to a prominent place near the window. The hat-box I laid on the table. As for the packages from Thycke & Thynne's, I moved the mountain, a bit at a time, into the spare bedroom behind Lethe's.

The telephone bell rang shrilly.

'Who's there?' I asked, hushing my voice as much as possible.

'Mr. Palmer.'

'Palmer?'

'Yes. Of Thycke & Thynne's.'

'Oh, damn!' I said; 'what the deuce do you want?'

'Have the things turned up?'

'Yes. Very much obliged. But shut up, if you don't mind. My sister's asleep, and this beastly thing may wake her.'

I listened to the first words of a frantic appeal to allow the delivery of a special line in dust-cloaks, which I cut short by ringing Mr. Palmer off. But the mischief was done.

From Lethe's room came a succession of sounds. First, the creak of the trunk's hinges. Half a minute later the downward rattling of the Venetian blinds and the opening of the window. Next, the squeaking of her bathroom taps, and the noise of the water increasing from a splash to the dull thundering of a miniature Niagara. I beat a retreat to the kitchen.

Three points, at least, were settled. In spite



VIRGINIE

of the drugging, and freezing, and jolting, which would have killed an average woman, or made her a sufferer for life, Lethe was awake, in buoyant health and strength. Again, she was no mere village beauty from a Latin hovel; on the contrary, she was possessed of a modish hat, and understood Venetian blinds. Last of all, she had not screamed at finding herself in a strange place. Probably she believed that she was in her own room at an hotel, and that Canuto would greet her by-and-bye. So far, however, she was accepting my arrangements as the most natural in the world.

I opened a bottle of soup, and decided that, as the lady was so very much alive, I might risk doing the peas *au sucre*. After *petits pois au sucre* she would have less ground for sulking at the absence of sweets. But as I bent over the stove my heart was thumping against my ribs. In half-an-hour or so I should meet her face to face. I should have to break to her the news, good or bad, of Canuto's flight. There would have to be a hundred explanations, a hundred arguments, in what might prove a vain attempt to adjust an almost impossible situation. And all this, probably, in some language other than my own.

Leaving the peas to cook themselves, I made haste to get through my own tubbing and shaving. And the more I thought it over, the more certain I felt that there would be a scene. If Canuto and Nicolo had suddenly presented them-



THE ICE

selves, wanting to fight, it would have been a pleasure to wipe the floor with them in turn. But from the vision of Lethe sobbing, Lethe stamping, Lethe scolding, I quailed. All the same, I made up my mind that she should not, in any circumstances, pass out of my watch and ward.

‘And, at least,’ I said to myself, ‘I shall see the colour of her eyes.’



CHAPTER VII

LETHE'S door opened, and she stepped out into the hall.

From my post at the gas-stove in the kitchen, whither I had returned to heat the soup and to butter and sugar the peas, I could see her plainly. She swam as gracefully as a swan towards the window, and stood there in the strong sunlight.

Although it has been misused and ridiculed well-nigh to death, there is only one phrase to describe Lethe as I saw her at that moment. She was a beautiful young lady. To have called her a pretty girl, or an elegant woman, would have been to miss the bull's-eye either on the one side or on the other. She had put on a simple white frock, made rather high-waisted. Below a broad blue sash the skirt was rather full. Her black hair, closely coiled, and tied with a bow of blue silk ribbon, hung down massily as far as the nape of her white neck. The whole effect was faintly old-fashioned, strongly pictorial. I went hot and cold by turns at the thought of having so rare, and lovely, and dainty, and high-bred a creature standing quite at home under my roof.

THE ICE

She turned round.

It was the supreme moment. I took my courage in both hands, and advanced with an easy air into the hall.

She started. I saw that her big eyes were heavenly blue. She looked me up and down. But she did not recoil, or shriek, or try to run away. It is true, her face became troubled, but the trouble was nothing worse than bewilderment. For a few seconds she seemed to be grappling some fugitive memory, or clutching at a vanishing clue. The struggle quickly ended. She was beaten. Memory would not return. She faced me calmly, and waited for me to speak.

I had rehearsed to myself, twenty times, a brace of Italian sentences expressing the hope that she had slept well, and the belief that she must be dying with hunger. But, when I tried to utter them, the words got all jumbled together, and I finished up absurdly in English.

She shook her head.

'Pardon, Monsieur,' she said, in the sweetest, clearest voice I had ever heard in my life, 'parlez Français, je vous prie.'

Spoken so distinctly and deliciously, French sounded as homely as English. At the same time it accorded with Lethe's mysteriousness. In the kitchen I had hoped frantically that she would speak English, but if she had actually done so there in the hall it would have shocked me rudely. And her French had a further advantage. Any awkwardness in my speeches would be set down



VIRGINIE

to unfamiliarity with the language rather than to embarrassment with the situation.

'I speak it very badly,' I said in French, 'but I'll do my best.'

'On the contrary,' she answered, 'you are speaking it very well.'

'Aren't you frightfully hungry?' I asked.

'Frightfully!' she replied, with a comical little grimace.

I tried a bold experiment in perfect candour.

'We're quite alone,' I said. 'I haven't a servant in the house. But dinner's nearly ready. Do you mind laying the table?'

She opened her eyes wide. But when I threw open the dining-room door, and she saw the table partially arranged near the window, she gave a little cry of pleasure and ran in.

'You're sure you don't mind?' I asked again.

'I love it,' she said. 'But what about flowers? I'll go and get some from the garden.'

I deliberated. What if her coolness and easiness were assumed? What if she were merely planning a dash for liberty? She was a picture of transparent innocence, but I decided to take no risks. If she went into the garden I would go too, and if she tried to bolt I would stop her, even if I had to snatch her by her pretty blue sash or her glossy black hair.

'We'll get a few roses,' I agreed.

Without asking leave, she stood on tiptoe and pulled down a bowl from a shelf. Somehow I couldn't screw up courage to take it away from

THE ICE

her, or to tell her that it was my chiefest treasure, and two thousand years old.

We went out into the garden. Fortunately there were no passers-by. Lethe pointed out the roses she fancied, and I cut them off with my knife till the bowl was full. When we were back in the house, and I took the bowl to the kitchen for water, Lethe followed me of her own accord. The soup was ready, and the fragrant peas were bubbling and chuckling softly in their bath of sweet butter.

‘If only I had an apron ——’ she said, drawing her skirt more closely round her, and moving as near as she dared to the stove.

‘You shall have one to-morrow,’ I replied, with the benevolent airs of an indulgent uncle to a teasing child. ‘This evening it isn’t necessary. Run away and finish the table. I shall serve dinner in five minutes.’

She obeyed without a word, leaving me so intoxicated with the deliciousness and unexpectedness of the whole incredible affair, that I nearly poured the peas into the soup instead of transferring them to the brass hot-plate which was to keep them warm while we ate the chicken. I could hardly believe my senses. Instead of a scene, and a scream, and a flight, and a brutal re-capture, and a desperate tangle, I had simply taken matter-of-course possession of a house-mate in the form of the sweetest and loveliest lady I had ever seen or even dreamed of. It seemed too good, too amazing, and, in a sense,


VIRGINIE

too ludicrous to last, and as I trundled the dinner-wagon on its rubber wheels softly along the hall, I half expected to catch Lethe escaping through the dining-room window.

But the bird was not flown. On the contrary, she was flitting about blithely, doing just as she pleased with my things, ancient and modern. The bowl having offended her, she had dispersed the roses among my three Etruscan cups. The glass and silver were set out in the ordinary fashion, but with that indescribable difference which lifts a good house above even the best-ordered of hotels.

She ran to help me at the door, and when I praised the table she did not conceal her delight. Without a moment's delay, I helped her copiously to soup. It was a Julienne, from the kitchen of a famous French cook, and I had added the few extra grains of pepper which hospitality demanded in the case of a newly unfrozen lady. Lethe consumed her portion with open satisfaction, and without losing much time in conversation.

Over the preparing of the omelette, which I made on a side-table, in a chafing-dish, we quarrelled. Little had I dreamt, until this astonishing evening, that I would ever brook correction as to the proper quantity of *fines herbes*. But Lethe contradicted me point-blank, and held to her doctrine without weakening. In the course of the contention she also took occasion to mend my French in three separate instances. But when the omelette was ready, she admitted



THE ICE

very handsomely that she had been in the wrong. Probably she had failed to make allowance for the dulness of our herbs as compared with the perter herbs of France. And I knew in my heart that those few minutes of quarrelling had chained me to her even more hopelessly than had the moments in the garden among the roses.

At the dressing of the salad Lethe held her peace. Evidently she knew that the moment of dressing a salad is the one moment in life when any word, however plausible, from any woman however wise, would be an unthinkable impertinence. The chicken was a plump bird and a tender, and we did not bother about the ham. As for the peas, they were not a failure.

After the soup Lethe ate little. Yet there was no silly mincing. She was a comfortable table companion, with the best Frenchwoman's manner, and, although she ate less in the long run than many an Englishwoman who spoils everything for everybody by expecting to be coaxed and pressed, she had a way of making the dinner seem a successful, go-ahead, good-humoured business from beginning to end. It was the same with the wine. Altogether she drank only a glass of Château Margaux and a much smaller glass of Barsac, but she drank like a princess, without irritating sipping or protestations. Indeed, even if I had not begun to be furiously in love with her, the thought of having to dine in future without Lethe would have struck a cold chill to my heart.



VIRGINIE

We were busy some time with the strawberries, eating them, like decent people, without sugar or even cream. With the coffee, after some hesitation, I offered her a cigarette, which she refused a little indignantly. But she soon forgave me, and we talked on until the rim of the July sun touched the purple ridge of the Uppington hills. Or, rather, we did not exactly talk. We chattered. I told her superficial things about the Etruscan cups, and about my great Collares claret from Portugal, which she would not touch. She prattled of the Crimson Rambler roses, which made a filigree of leaves and stems and flowers across the open window; of the splendours of the sunset; of the excellence of our dinner. I liked Lethe for being so delicate a gourmet. She praised the peas and the strawberries as spiritually as she praised the crimson roses and the setting sun. But not once did we approach a serious topic. Not a question was asked, or a word said, from one side or the other, to clear up the mystery of our meeting. On my part, this reticence was due to a fear of precipitating a crisis with which I might not be able to deal; but on her part it seemed as if she asked no questions simply because she had none to ask, and gave no explanations simply because she had none to give. The dainty triviality of her talk was unmistakably spontaneous. She was dissembling nothing.

But at the last glimpse of the descending sun, as it plunged into the gulf behind the hills, her prattling ceased. She gazed through the hanging

THE ICE

tangle of roses towards the golden light. Then she looked across at my face curiously, anxiously. I met her gaze, and she coloured. With eyes fixed on the table, she heaved a troubled sigh.

My heart beat fast. It was coming. In another moment she would find the clue. Memory would return, and the secret would be mine.

The silence lengthened.

'Tell me,' I asked gently, 'what is the matter.'

'I was wondering ——' she began, in grave, slow tones.

'Tell me,' I pleaded tenderly, as she paused. 'Don't be afraid.'

'I was wondering how we're going to wash up all these things.'

I laughed outright. The relief was as immense as the tension had been terrible. Whatever Lethe's secret might be, I felt a great dread that it would eventually part her from me, and I resolved at that moment to keep it at arm's length as long as I could.

'It's nothing to laugh at,' she said.

'Yes, it is,' I retorted. 'They'll almost wash themselves. There are all sorts of new-fangled appliances in the scullery. Scalding water spurts all over the plates like a perfect water-spout. As for the knives ——'

'That may do for you, but it won't do for me,' she said decisively. 'If you want me to eat off these things again, we shall have to wash them up properly.'

I tried to argue, but she would not listen.



VIRGINIE

'If only I'd an apron,' she said gloomily.

'You shall have one to-morrow.'

'But I want one to-night.'

I thought of Thycke & Thynne's thirteen boxes. But what if Lethe should expect me to unpack them in her presence, or to explain why they were in the house? I thought it safer to hold my tongue.

Lethe pouted, and looked at me rebelliously. But when I did not relent, she tried another way. Leaning a little towards me, she said, in a plaintive and coaxing little voice:

'Do lend me an apron . . . Please!'

'I've only great big ones,' I protested; chef's aprons. If you put one on I mightn't ever find you again.'

For answer she leapt up, and began piling the things on the dinner-wagon. And when I went reluctantly to one of the linen-presses in a corner of the kitchen, she kept close to my elbow, lest I should change my mind.

I found an apron — a vast white overall, with sleeves. But instead of flinging it back into the press, she made me tie it round her neck, almost up to her chin. A great fold had to be taken in at her waist to keep the thing clear of her feet, and I was obliged to turn the cuffs back fully three inches. The moment it was fixed she scampered off to the hall, where there was a long mirror. I followed, and found her bubbling over with glee.

Under strict surveillance, I did the washing, and Lethe did the drying. While she was polish-

THE ICE

ing the glasses, I carried the ham and the remains of the chicken hurriedly into the pantry, and secretly locked the door. I did not choose that she should catch sight just then of the melting ice, and the broken glass, and the silver trumpet. Had she seen them, either she would or she would not have recognised them, and I could not decide which of the two situations would be the more awkward.

The drying took a long time, and when it was finished poor Lethe sat down on one of the kitchen chairs, with a sigh of unutterable weariness.

'May I go to bed now?' she demanded.

For ten minutes I had been counting on at least an hour's talk on the rustic bench in the garden, and it was with an unwilling heart that I answered:

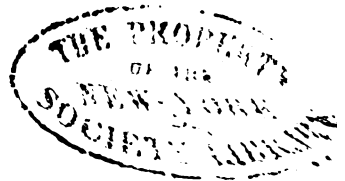
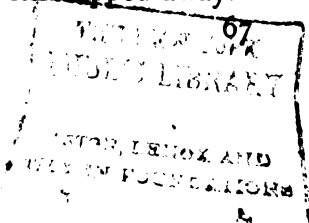
'You're to do whatever you like.'

'That means bed,' she said, jumping up. 'To-morrow night we won't cook so many things. Good-night.'

She said it with the easy openness of a child expecting a good-night kiss, and it was as much as I could do to restrain myself from imprinting one on her cheek.

'Good-night,' I said.

She stood beside me quietly while I untied the big apron. I thought she looked lovelier than ever as her graceful shoulders, and beautiful arms, and dainty waist emerged from its clumsy folds. Lipping another pretty French 'Good-night,' she tripped away.





CHAPTER VIII

AFTER the sweltering day, the night was pleasant in the murmuring garden. I sat on the bench smoking and watching the dots and slats and lozenges of light which fell on the lawn through Lethe's Venetian blinds.

So long as the lights kept me company, I smoked away in an exaltation of soul which took no thought for the morrow. It was enough for me that Lethe existed, that she had eaten at my board, that she was sleeping under my roof. In a kind of dream I looked forward to the next day and to innumerable days after it, every one of them to be lived with Lethe. Canuto and Nicolo faded down into the vague background of negligible trifles. She had floated unaccountably to my side; but I promised myself that the anchors she had dropped into the depths of my life should never drag or be lifted.

A few yards away, a nightingale was singing in a giant thorn-tree. There was just enough motion in the air to keep the leaves a-rustle, and to sway the ghost-white bodies of the lilies, and to swing the sweet-smelling little roses like

THE ICE

censers to and fro. I closed my eyes and gave myself up to dreams.

When I looked up it was with a shock of loneliness and foreboding. Lethe had blown out her candles, and the friendly dots and slats and lozenges of light were gone from the lawn. The nightingale was still in full song, the lilies were as white, the roses were as sweet; but my heart grew cold and heavy as lead. How did I know that she would not be rapt away as abruptly and mysteriously as she had come? Perhaps, before to-morrow morning, Fate would extinguish her and blot her out of my life, just as Lethe had extinguished the candles and blotted out the lights from the grass.

The thought made me set my teeth. I took another great oath that I would never give her up. Then I pulled my wits together and began looking all the facts in the face.

For the present, it was no use hoping for light from Canuto. After the enormous pains he had taken to lodge Lethe in the bungalow, it was out of the question that he would return quickly to reclaim her. I formed the theory that, for some reason or other, the man had found himself obliged to flee the country, leaving Lethe behind. But what was she to him or he to her?

I forced myself to the detestable task of working out the problem from the standpoint of a man of the world. I asked myself how I should view the affair if I had not fallen in love with



VIRGINIE

Lethe, or if I had heard of such a thing happening to some other man. From a worldly point of view, what good could Canuto do himself by his proceedings?

The answer that leapt into my mind made me burn with anger. Canuto knew that I had money — money quite out of proportion to my modest establishment at Brattle. It followed that his object was either to bind me to a wife through whom Canuto would contrive to extract supplies for the rest of his life, or else to involve me in some infamous complication which would give him an opportunity for blackmail.

The business had to be thought out from beginning to end and from top to bottom. So I put to myself the bitterest question of all. If a hard-headed man of the world must conclude that Canuto was a blackmailing adventurer, what must that same hard-headed man of the world make of Lethe? With heart and brains on fire, I realised what ninety-nine men out of a hundred would say of her — what she had been, what she was, what Canuto had smuggled her into an inflammable young man's house to do.

But it was for less than a moment that I gave the foul thought a lodgment in my breast. Then a vision of Lethe rose up before me. She seemed to come and stand at my side, more fragrant than the roses, whiter than the swaying lilies, more piteous than the nightingale. The words of Canuto's letter rushed over me — 'purer than the lily' — and my whole soul knew that the

THE ICE

words were true. An unwilling, unconscious instrument of a scoundrel's dark devilry she might be; but, in herself, she was as innocent as a child, as stainless as an angel.

Faith and hope and charity came back to me. With a calm mind I made my plans for the future. Canuto should be dealt with as necessity and opportunity arose. But as for Lethe, my sweet Lethe, I would accept her just as she was. I resolved to curb sternly every impulse of curiosity, and to wait upon events for enlightenment. Instead of plying her with questions, I would piece together all the hints and scraps of information which she would surely let fall in casual talk until I found some clue worth following.

But my unshakable belief in her perfect sincerity and innocence did not hinder me from trying to puzzle out the answers to a few minor riddles. Recalling her alertness of mind and her skill both in conversation and in household tasks, it baffled me to explain how she could have awakened in a strange house, clad in nothing more than a piece of yellow silk, without raising an outcry or showing some signs of bewilderment. Taken by itself, this fact would have been conclusive proof that she was consciously acting a carefully prepared part under Canuto's instructions. But as I lived every detail of the evening over again, every tone and word and deed of Lethe's confirmed Canuto's statement that she had forgotten her own past entirely and,



VIRGINIE

perhaps, irrevocably. How she could forget a whole train of events, which must have been exciting, and yet remember the niceties of her native language and a thousand little refinements of dress and bearing and behaviour I could not, for the life of me, understand. But, intelligible or not, there was the fact. It was as undeniable a fact as Lethe herself — Lethe who, although she could not be explained, was most certainly sleeping like a tired-out child on the canopied bed in the best of the bungalow bedrooms.

Before I turned in for the night, I quietly moved the glass tube and the aluminium shell and the wooden packing-case into a disused out-house. I swabbed up the ice-water from the pantry floor as well as I could and trusted to the dry summer air to do the rest. As for the silver trumpet, I took it and hid it away in a long drawer in my study.

CHAPTER IX

THE baker and the milkman were staggered by my orders for unmanly cakes, and for doubled supplies of rolls and butter and eggs and milk and cream.

It struck half-past seven just before the milkman drove away from the gate. As I walked back to the house with a basket in one hand and two cans in the other, Lethe met me at the door. Her liquid blue eyes shone and her cheeks were a-bloom like two soft peaches. She looked as fresh as a young wild rose while the sun still sparkles on the dew. With her fondness for the pictorial and the old-fashioned, she had put on a kind of muslin, sprigged and flowered with tiny leaves and buds. She hailed me gaily and began boasting of a sleep which had endured unbroken for more than nine hours.

'Is there going to be coffee soon?' she asked, humbly.

'Not a drop,' I answered, 'unless you go and make it.'

She snatched the cans from my hand and sped off to the kitchen. As she turned round, I saw that her hair was unceremoniously plaited into



VIRGINIE

two tails tied with big bows and hanging down to her waist.

I carried a table and two chairs into the garden behind the house. It was an oblong garden, screened from the meadows on either side by high board-fences and by triple rows of shrubs and limes and young chestnuts. The further end, planted with vegetables, was bounded by a low hedge over which one could see a twenty-acre corn-field fringed with giant elms. Hitherto I had not used or liked this back garden very much. Its complete seclusion had seemed to carry the solitariness of my life to an unhealthy extreme, and, therefore, I had preferred the smaller and more conventional garden at the front which commanded the cheerful road and the friendly sights and sounds of horses and men. But, as I sat one chair for Lethe and another for myself, and a table for us both, I blessed the unknown man who had builded the palisade so stoutly and planted the trees and shrubs so closely. It had not been good for me to be alone. But Eve had been miraculously created for me; and this shady, scented, songful, sacred spot should be our Garden of Eden.

I found Lethe standing on a chair in order to reach the coffee-pot. She laid two fingers on the hand I held out to her and jumped lightly down. We fought a pitched battle over the brewing of the café au lait which ended in my defeat and retreat. She had her way. And it was a good way. After ten minutes' industry,

THE ICE

she carried out into the garden two jugs. One jug, a big one, contained a pint of hot, creamy milk; the other, which was of the same colour and pattern as its big brother, but hardly bigger than a jug in a doll's house, held about two tablespoonfuls of quintessence of coffee, stronger than death, blacker than night. Instead of cups, Lethe set out two white bowls.

While we consumed this life-giving mixture with soup-spoons and dallied with the crisp, pale-gold crust of our rolls, the perfectness of all external things awoke in me a vast internal foreboding. Had there been one tiny defect in our feast, or one little flaw in our surroundings, I could have fastened my mind upon it to the exclusion of doubts and fears. But this identity of the real and the ideal was unnatural; and, instead of abandoning myself to a golden moment of idyllic bliss, I thrilled with exquisite pain at the thought that it could not last. Then, without knowing what I was doing, I stopped in the middle of some trivial speech and gazed at Lethe defiantly, as if challenging her to try and disengage her life from mine.

'What is the matter?' she demanded, all confused and alarmed.

'Nothing,' I answered, recovering self-control.

'Why did you look at me like that?'

Her air was bewildered and disappointed rather than peremptory and suspicious; but, for a few seconds, our perfect accord was broken. I invented the best excuse I could.



VIRGINIE

‘I didn’t look at you like that,’ I said. ‘But I’d just remembered your apron.’

‘My apron?’

‘Yes. I promised you should have your apron this morning. And you haven’t got it.’

She darted at me one puzzled, half-doubting glance. But it endured less than a moment. Then she broke out merrily:

‘My apron! You looked at me as if you were thinking about my shroud! I felt quite frightened.’

‘There are all sorts of things in the boxes besides aprons,’ I said. ‘When we’ve washed up these basins, you’d better pick out whatever you want. Then the draper can call and take the rest of the stuff away.’

‘I don’t want anything beyond two aprons,’ she said, gratefully, but decidedly.

‘That’s a pity,’ I exclaimed. ‘As soon as I knew you were going to be here a long time ——’

I threw a furtive look at her eyes; but she was listening without surprise or demur.

‘That is,’ I went on, waxing audacious, ‘as soon as I knew you were going to be here altogether, I told the shop-people you would want rather a lot of things, and I put them to a good deal of trouble. We can’t possibly pack all their stuff back again, minus only two aprons.’

She began to look troubled, and seemed once more to be clutching at some thought or reminiscence that eluded her.

‘We can’t, can we?’ I repeated.

THE ICE

She came to herself with a start.'

'We can,' she said. 'But I see what you mean.' And she got up and began gathering together the jugs and bowls.

While she was polishing the spoons and replacing the china on the racks, I went and opened the door of the bedroom where I had heaped up the wares of Messrs. Thycke & Thynne.

'They're in here,' I called along the corridor. 'In this room behind yours.'

She came running to look. The wall of boxes, as high as her shoulders, first awed and then excited her.

'They look better outside than in,' I explained, uneasily recalling the æsthetics of Thycke & Thynne's hirelings. 'I ordered them in a hurry, and they're a poor lot. But perhaps they'll keep you going. How will it be to carry what you want into your own room and to leave the rest in here till they can fetch them away?'

I am not sure that she would have forbidden me to help her; at least, to the extent of a cutting of strings and a lifting of lids. But one does not become a complete ladies' man in a single day, and I fled modestly to the dining-room under a pretence of having letters to write.

I had dipped a purposeless pen less than half-a-dozen times in the ink when the bungalow rang with silvern laughter. I did not dare to investigate the cause; and for five minutes there was tantalising silence. Then I heard quick steps in



VIRGINIE

the hall. Next, a pounding on the door; and, before I could run to open it or even answer, Lethe burst in, radiant and brimming over with glee. Her pretty French-girl's figure was oddly dissembled in a mannish English walking-skirt and a kind of Norfolk jacket — one of the heavenly creations chosen by Miss Evans, of the Costumes. It gave me a passing twinge to behold her so ignobly garbed, even in jest. But, as she swung round gaily on her heel for me to see all the points of Messrs. Thycke & Thynne's masterpiece, I laughed loudly with her. Before I could utter a word, she marched away with a dainty burlesque of a sportswoman's bold stride and banged the door behind her.

A quarter of an hour later she came sailing back with a quite endurable blue and white sunshade. It was open, and she carried it aloft as if she were out on the lawn under a noonday sun.

'Isn't it pretty?' she asked.

'You go well with it,' I said blunderingly.

'May I have it?'

'Of course you can. You are to keep whatever you like.'

She ran off again as pleased as a child with a new toy.

'I can't have this, though, can I?' she enquired, reappearing almost immediately with an armful of something billowy, which rustled and glistened as she moved.

It was the Thycke & Thynne under-skirt —

THE ICE

price fifteen-eleven-three — and seemed a decorous enough garment. But I blushed.

‘You can have everything,’ I made haste to answer. ‘All that’s here is yours. I didn’t explain it properly. Throw out the rubbish and we’ll have it carted away. What’s left is yours.’

She bobbed me a thankful, playful little curtsey and smiled her brightest smile. But she shook her head.

Altogether she returned five or six times with her ‘May I have this?’ until I plucked up sufficient courage to follow her as far as the mat of the back-bedroom door. But my first and last attempt at practical assistance ended embarrassingly; the only box I opened being neatly topped with a multi-coloured layer of open-work silk stockings. I effected a tactful escape, and Lethe quietly took out what she wanted from the remaining packages without further consultations or permissions. Her total abstractions, however, were so meagre in quantity that I quailed at the thought of Mr. Thycke’s disappointment and Mr. Thynne’s indignation.

The apron was less of a success from her ladyship’s standpoint than from mine. As a shield and buckler against the splashings of taps and the sputterings of gas-stoves it was a heartless mockery; but, considered as a coquette confection of cambric and lace edging and pale blue rosettes, I found it more than tolerable.

We lunched in the garden, adding simply a



VIRGINIE

salad and some strawberries to the truffled galantine of veal and the medley of cakes delivered by the trusty pastry-cook of Brattle. Afterwards, I helped her through a weak place in the hedge and we loitered under the green shade of the elms along the margin of the corn-field.

‘It is sweet here,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Your France is beautiful. But the sun shines and the lark sings sometimes even in old England.’

‘England?’ she cried, starting violently. ‘England? What do you mean? This isn’t England?’

Even if it had seemed prudent to deceive her, I lacked the skill to do it. So I answered frankly:

‘Yes. This is England.’

Once more I saw that she was grasping desperately at clues which broke and vanished at her lightest touch. But this time her trouble cut deeper and lasted longer. I hurried to speak and break the spell.

‘You won’t hate England long. Not when you’ve got to know it.’

‘I don’t hate England,’ she retorted quickly. ‘I never did. I’ve always loved it. I’ve wanted to see it all my life.’

‘And now you’ve seen it, what do you think of it?’

She looked out from the shadow over the unruffled sea of corn and up into the unclouded



THE ICE

sky before she answered, with an odd mixture of thankfulness and disillusion:

'It is just like France.'

Lest the struggle to remember should recommence, I led her back to our own garden and busied her with questions about the French names of the rarer English flowers. With quick steps, her contentment and high spirits came back; and she helped me skilfully as well as good-naturedly throughout two hours of garden tasks until it was time for tea.



CHAPTER X

THE next day was Sunday. I could have evaded it if the bells of Brattle Church had not suddenly shattered the sunny calm of the morning as we sat over our coffee and milk.

'It is Sunday!' cried Lethe, jumping up.

'So it is,' I agreed unwillingly.

'But . . . about church?' she added, not quite at her ease. 'Don't you go to church?'

'Sometimes,' I answered, speaking the truth. For, as Brattle Church was bolted and barred more securely than a gaol from Monday morning to Saturday night, I had been forced to attend two Sunday morning services in order to examine certain monumental brasses of the fourteenth century in the floor of the north aisle.

'If you go sometimes,' said Lethe, losing her awkwardness so soon as she found I was not a rank unbeliever, 'you ought to go always. You must go to-day.'

It was immeasurably annoying. I had counted upon a long-drawn golden day all alone with Lethe in the garden. The day before, my Anglo-Saxon earnestness and dutifulness had held me back from the full enjoyment of her companion-

THE ICE

ship. There had been enough of the Puritan in my blood to give me qualms and to make me scorn myself as an effeminate and worthless creature for spending the whole of an irredeemable week-day in enervating dalliance. So much for Saturday. But Sunday would be different. One does not work on a Sunday; and I had awakened in the Sunday stillness with soft thoughts of a delicious, indolent, almost unending day, to be spent at the sweet side of youth and beauty without a single interruption by the world and without one disturbing growl from conscience. The inward heartiness with which I wished that the Brattle bell-ringers (whom I knew for six of Brattle's ungodliest and groggiest citizens) were all safely gone home to the devil must have betrayed itself in my face, for Lethe persisted:

'You will go, won't you?'

I opened my mouth to argue; but she shifted her ground in a twinkling.

'I mean,' she said, 'you will take me?'

'Of course,' I said, beaten. For I could not forbid her to go; and it was unthinkable that she should step an inch from the bungalow gate without my escort. She clapped her hands over her victory and sped away to dress.

The bells banged and clanged on maddeningly; and, all of a sudden, I realised what I had done. To the sound of the Brattle bells I had engaged myself to walk, rather late, into Brattle Church with a lovely young alien whose face would



VIRGINIE

distract all the men, while her clothes and the grace with which she wore them would upset all the women. I pictured Miss Ferguson, the Scotch lassie who kept the pastry cook's ledgers, joining even more fervently than usual in the General Thanksgiving on the strength of her sudden light upon the mystery of my urgent telephonings for strawberry puffs and cheese-cakes and cream tarts. I foresaw the restrained disapproval of the rector's wife, the insular and provincial sniffings of the Misses Waddleton (milliners and dressmakers), and the unabashed disgust of Sir Robert Stacke's agent's unbeautiful daughter. Also, I foreheard the ribaldries of the lewder and baser youths who knew all about my excavations at the villa and would audibly assure one another in the churchyard that I had 'dug up a little bit of all-right, and no error.' Worst of all, the only way to the church lay under the window of my char-lady, the too-faithful Mrs. Hipkins.

For Lethe's sake much more than for my own it was not to be endured. Yet I had given my promise, and, in default of explanations which I could not put into words, she would hold me to it.

I thought of the Brattle Church service; of the bearded rector and of the moustached curate; of the mixed choir; of the grim pew-openeress in faded black; of the communion-table without cross or candles; of the Lion and the Unicorn, the only graven images in the place; and of the

THE ICE

thirty-five minute sermon. For, among Low-Church sanctuaries, Brattle was the lowest of the low. It was one of the last entrenchments of that Calvinistic Evangelicalism which our grandfathers did not find paradoxical. In sating my sun-bright Lethe's appetite for church by taking her to such tomb-like frigour, I would be like Jephthah meeting his singing child with a sentence of death. She had asked me for bread, and I was about to give her a stone. I cursed the inactivity of the Ritualistic party. Why on earth couldn't they have built a nice all-alive church, full of 'idolatrous' pictures, in Brattle to 'do the work of Rome'?

As the sounding name of Rome rang in my brain, the way out of the muddle opened before me in a flash. Rome! of course. Even if Lethe had been able to find her place in the book and to stand up and sit down at the proper moments, and, in short, to get through the Brattle matins without making a scandal, I suddenly remembered that she was doubtless a dutiful daughter of His Holiness Pius X., gloriously reigning, and that, so far as Lethe was concerned, Brattle Church was a desecrated fane, a conventicle without priest or altar, filled with heretics and schismatics. In short, His Holiness deplored Brattle only less warmly than Brattle abominated the Pope.

Clearly Brattle would not do. And I knew of no Catholic church nearer than an Italian-looking building whose pillared front I had



VIRGINIE

often passed in Westhampton. But my decision was taken in a moment. I went to work getting out the car.

Mademoiselle emerged from her room in a rather prim print, with a belt of the same material. It was the kind of print one hardly ever sees outside France, of a check or chess-board pattern composed of a thousand tiny dark-blue and white squares. Her hair was dressed as it had been at our first dinner. The simple trimming of her rather large hat consisted entirely of a great bow, of a chess-board pattern like the gown, but with larger squares, and in silk instead of print. She carried an ivory-bound missal with old silver clasps and the blue and white sunshade from Thycke & Thynne's. From her neck depended a small, plain cross of gold.

'Do I look nice?' she demanded, with smiling confidence.

'Don't ask,' I answered severely. 'When we go to church we ought to think of more serious things than dress. But what about your cloak or shawl or mantle or wrap or jacket?'

'On a day like this?'

'Yes. On a day like this. Print isn't enough for the car.'

When she heard the throbbing of the car outside the gate and knew that it was for her, Lethe's delight knew no bounds.

'I've never been in one before,' she cried.

'Well, get in now. The bells are stopping. We shall be late. But you must take a wrap.'

THE ICE

'I shan't need one.'

'Go straight and get a wrap.'

'I haven't got one thin enough.'

'Do you mean to say there isn't one in those dozens of boxes?'

All excitement to be off, she dashed into the back room, made wrappings and lids fly, and came triumphantly back with a thin, biscuit-coloured rain-cloak.

'It's detestable,' I said. 'But it'll have to do. *En voiture!*'

I bundled her in and we rushed off, making a detour to avoid Brattle.

'It's a long way to the church,' said Lethe, as we flew past the fourth milestone.

'Isn't it?' I retorted. 'Yet you say I ought to go every Sunday.'

The Westhampton Papists begin their proceedings at the same hour as the Brattle Protestants; yet we were only eleven minutes late. The people were standing up for the Gospel, which made our entrance easy. After I had imitated Lethe's genuflection ungracefully, an Irishman standing inside the narthex made just the faintest rattle with a brass alms-dish. Then, having swiftly discerned the amount of my contribution, he marched us up to the front row of chairs, only a few feet from the low balustrade of white and green marble which divided the gilded and crowded sanctuary from the bald and sparsely-peopled nave.

I soon discovered that High Mass is not one



VIRGINIE

of the things which they manage better in France. This was the first time I had witnessed anything of the kind on British soil; but, as I called to mind a score of such functions in world-famous French cathedrals, the comparison was nearly all in favour of Westhampton. The altar-boys' faces and surplices were clean; the organ was in tune; the faithful rose and knelt down again with unanimity and fervour; the flowers and images were bright and rich without gaudiness; and nobody praised God through his nose.

After the Gospel there was no sermon, but we went straight on to the Creed. *Credo in unum Deum* chaunted the celebrant in his chasuble of green and gold; and the snow-clad boys and men made haste to answer, eagerly, triumphantly, voluminously, *Patrem omnipotentem, Factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium*. Higher and higher rose the tide of song, until I wondered whether even the *Te Deum* itself could ever be so exultant a hymn as this ancient symbol in which the church confesses and proudly boasts of her faith.

Out of mere good manners, I knelt down with Lethe and the others as one boy's clear voice enounced *Et incarnatus est*. But, before the boy reached *Et homo factus est*, I knew that I was also bending the knees of my spirit. Some of the faith which brimmed in Lethe's soul overflowed into mine. Not that she shewed any exceptional reverence or glowed with any of the ardour of a devotee. On the contrary, her few



THE ICE

crossings and kneelings and risings had the ease of pious habits practised from early childhood; and it was only through preternatural sympathy between us and through my complete absorption in all she did that I divined the unshakable solidity of her simple faith. It was as clear to me as the noonday that, when she knelt in honour of the Incarnation, the chorister's voice was not stirring up in her a merely subjective religiosity by means of the Latin words and their venerable associations. His *Homo factus est* was a literal statement of what Lethe believed, to be taken in its plain sense. She was sure that the maker of heaven and earth, who had lit the fiery torch of the sun, who had piled high the mountains, who had poured forth the floods, had also drawn breath as a human babe in Palestine. More. She believed that He who had painted the roses in our garden at Brattle and had filled with scents the hedge-flowers of the lanes through which we had plunged on our way to Westhampton, was really and truly present, by a miracle of power and love and humility, among the lights and flowers of the altar. As I knelt at her side I did not receive a heavenly vision, a direct intuition that the objects of her faith did indeed exist as immutable realities whether men believed in them or not. But a solemn persuasion, an indirect conviction, was borne in upon my mind. Though I hardly had faith in Lethe's God, I attained to faith in her faith. It was not imaginable that such faith could spring from and yearn to a lie.




VIRGINIE

Only the truth could have begotten it, only the truth could be sustaining it.

In due time the Sanctus-bell rang and the divine mysteries rose to their incredible climax. Incredible, I mean, to me. And yet it was upon me, the unbeliever, the outsider, that it wrought its miracles. In a sudden, broad blaze of self-knowledge I saw my human weakness, my imminent temptations, and all the perils to young flesh and blood which must beset my daily and hourly comradeship with a maid so guileless and so lovely.

The organ filled the church with soft and holy sounds. The deep-toned, gong-like Sanctus-bell spoke solemnly from the altar steps where the white servers and the golden priests knelt among tall, slender candles and wreathing clouds from the tinkling censers. Lethe bent lower, her face hidden in her hands; and I swore an oath on all she held so sacred that, with the help of whatever saints and virgins there might be in Lethe's heaven, I would hold her in honour, and guard her from all foes, especially from myself.

We regained the bungalow, unobserved, soon after one o'clock when all Brattle was busy with baked meats and boiled vegetables. The day was perfect, with the gentlest of zephyrs whispering in the leaves and with the fleeciest of clouds trailing white veils here and there across the vast blue sky. And all the shining afternoon and long glamorous evening we came and went, and



THE ICE

went and came, in our corn-field and among our roses, chattering gaily or sitting side by side in delicious silence or eating and drinking simply at a rustic table in the midst of daisied grass.

That was my day of days.





BOOK II
THE WHEAT



CHAPTER I

AFTER tea on her second Sunday at the bungalow, we were reclining, Lethe in a deck-chair and I on a bright Austrian rug, under one of the elm-trees on the margin of our corn-field.

It had come to be the favourite patch in our little world; for it was a snugger, greener, more secret nest than any corner of the bungalow garden. Until the corn whitened to harvest, there could be no reason why any human being should wade through that golden sea to molest us. Our rug was spread on a half-moon of short clean grass, backed by a close-grown hedge of whitethorn and wild-rose and bramble and convolvulus and honeysuckle. To our right and left rose the trunks of two elms, like two weather-gnarled and enmossed pillars of a grandly mouldering abbey. Right in front of us stood the wheat. A soft unworldly light was playing at hide-and-seek with the blue corn-flowers and scarlet poppies among its millions of soaring stems.

Lethe was reading *Delphine*. I was leaning on my elbow, gazing into the far-stretching jungle of corn-stalks and dreamily recalling the events of the ten days last past.



VIRGINIE

The week had run its course without alarms. Canuto and Nicolo had made no sign of life. Brattle, if it thought of me at all, had gone on regarding me as a misogynist recluse. To avert suspicion, I had arranged for a small parcel of extra supplies to be posted nightly by a French charcutier and patissier in London. At a rapid interview with Sir Robert Stacke's agent, on the Monday night, after Mademoiselle had gone to bed, I had cut short the excavations at the villa on the fairly honest plea that the drought had so hardened the soil as to endanger any frail objects which our picks and shovels might approach. The same night I had called on my charwoman, the wife of digger Hipkins, to bid her suspend her visits to the bungalow until further notice. Brattle is a cleanly country-side, smokeless and almost dustless; and, so far, the perfect weather and Lethe's perfect neatness had co-operated with my clumsy efforts to keep the house bright and sweet. But I knew that such conditions could not last for ever; and, as I lay on the rug and stared into the green depths of the wheat, the thought of the ultimate inevitableness of Mrs. Hipkins chilled me as if a cloud had crossed the sun. Nicolo and Canuto were already misty impossibilities; but Mrs. Hipkins, with her passion for porter and her dogged loyalty to the onion, was a near certainty, a black reality, an implacable serpent gliding slowly and surely to the gateway of my paradise.

Paradise is the word. Without a single inter-

THE WHEAT

change of question and answer concerning her past or mine, Lethe and I had simply accepted one another and had lived through the long days in a confidence so spontaneous and complete that a succession of detailed 'confidences' would have seemed petty and out of tune. We talked a great deal; and not all of our talk was mere chattering. But, beyond my firm persuasion that we did often touch deep chords, especially as the twilights fell, I can remember hardly any of the things we said. Probably my ignorance of the finer shades of French protracted every talk; and, no doubt, our persistence in conveying one to another, through paraphrase after paraphrase, our exact thought or feeling studded the days with countless flashing points of interest such as memory cannot retain. But there was one oft-recurring theme which I cannot forget. She had a passion for landscape, and nothing delighted her more than to indulge her imagination in the re-shaping of the scenes around us. At one time she would gaze over the corn-field from the end of our garden and say:

'Look over all this wheat. Imagine those hills pushed back over the edge of the world and thundering down into nowhere. With the hills gone, the sky would come right down to the horizon. Instead of that furthest hedge, imagine a green bank rising up — the green bank of a canal higher than the field — and a golden-brown sail of a big barge, filled with wind and pushing slowly along. In the place of the farm-buildings,



VIRGINIE

picture three windmills on hillocks — three windmills, white, with blue stripes. Then it would be Holland. Don't you wish it could all be like that, just for to-day? Wouldn't it be sweet?'

At other times she would magnify the hills to immeasurable, insurmountable snow-clad mountains and would re-compose the actual foreground into a lowland of Savoy. Or she would pretend to detach a formless, blunt, cottage-strewn slope of our hills and to sharpen it into a shapely cone mantled with vineyards and olives and crowned with the domes and towers of some hill-city of Umbria. And always, before the unstudied, vivid word-painting became self-conscious and overdone, she would wind up in the same formula, turning to me with her eager, childish, 'Wouldn't it be sweet?'

On this particular Sunday afternoon she startled me out of my reverie by closing *Delphine* with a resentful snap.

'Such a stupid book!' she said, letting it fall to the grass.

I did not answer, but lay and watched her. Without glancing down at me, she sank back in the chair with her hands clasped behind her head. For two or three minutes she looked steadily up into the summer sky.

'It is the Ionian sea,' she said at last, softly, as if speaking to herself, 'the Ionian sea and the isles. I can see a white pavement of marble descending into still blue water.'

THE WHEAT

Following her gaze, I saw a continent of cloud, shaped like Africa, with a western coast of ivory; and, leagues away in the gulf of azure, a cloud-islet as white and gracious as a swan's breast.

'There is one little isle,' she went on, 'with the sun shining all over it and the sea murmuring all round it all day long. Don't you wish we could fly to it and stay there always? Wouldn't it be sweet?'

Something told me plainly that she meant less than she had said. I knew, in my inmost heart, that I ought to have answered impersonally and dispassionately; but the worship and longing which I had been repressing for a week would not be wholly denied.

'Sweet?' I echoed. 'To fly there this moment and to stay there for ever, you and I? It would be more than sweet. It would be divine!'

My answer, far too ardently spoken, shattered her day-dream like a bomb. Startled, she sat up and faced me, her cheeks hotly reddening.

'What do you mean?' she demanded, with just enough haughtiness and anger to make her more beautiful than ever.

I saw that I was confronted by something more than coyness. Her confusion and alarm were genuine. I had blurted out my devotion too soon. Had she been a mere coquette, I should have blundered badly. But my mistake stood out so clear in the light of her simple honesty that I thought I could repair it.



VIRGINIE

‘What do I mean?’ I retorted. ‘Why, what did you say?’

Still frowning, she answered nothing.

‘You said,’ I went on, growing bolder, ‘how sweet it would be if you and I could fly straight away to an Ionian isle and live there for ever — a marble island, full in the sea and sun. That was what you said. Wasn’t it?’

She looked at me suspiciously, but could not maintain all her haughtiness or more than a shadow of her anger.

‘You said,’ I concluded, “‘wouldn’t it be sweet?’” And I agreed with you. I said it would be divine. And so it would.’

‘I didn’t mean . . . that,’ she replied quickly. And, still ruffled and uneasy, she groped for her fallen book.

‘We mustn’t quarrel,’ I said, trying to smile, although my heart was chilling and sickening at this first cloud, and at her dashing of my hopes.

‘We are not quarrelling,’ she said, opening the book without meeting my eyes.

‘You misunderstood me,’ I added, springing to my feet and standing at her side.

‘You are sure?’ she demanded, eagerly looking straight up into my face. ‘Quite sure that I misunderstood you?’

Looking down into the depths of her blue eyes, I could not tell her a lie. So I said frankly: ‘Forgive me. I ought not to have said it. I was in the wrong.’

I saw her upturned face colour before she



THE WHEAT

averted her eyes and bent her head again to her book.

'Say you forgive me,' I pleaded, stooping to her ear.

'Of course I forgive you,' she said with a tremor in her voice, as if she felt as glad as I that the little rift was mended. But she bent still lower over her book.

'I am going into the house to find you a cushion,' I ventured, seeing that she did not mean to lie back in the deck-chair any more.

'Thank you,' she said gratefully. 'I should like a cushion very much.' And, as I turned to go, she shyly tried to shew me that we were friends again by looking up at me for a moment with one of her old smiles, her eyes meeting mine with trustful affection, though not, alas! with love.

After I had picked out the cushion from a heap of oddments, which I had ordered at Thycke & Thynne's to console them for Lethe's disdain of their costumes and trousseaux, I paused in the shadow of the door leading from the kitchen to the garden so that I might enjoy for a few moments the picture which met my eyes. It was a picture framed in a rustic arch, all overhung by white and crimson roses, through which I looked down the garden, over the low hedge, to our encampment in the corn-field. Owing to a slight rise in the ground, I could see her plainly against the high curving background of hedgerow. She had laid aside her book once more and



VIRGINIE

was gazing up at a long broken cloud, as white as summer breakers on a reef.

A cold fear, colder than cold steel, stabbed at my heart. Lethe did not love me. And, even if Canuto did not part us, what hope was there that she would ever learn to love me, even if we were together to our lives' end? For all I knew, she had been more fully mine during our blithe, wonderful first week than she could ever be again. I began to curse myself bitterly for my monstrous folly and conceit in believing I could hurry her to be in love with me simply by declaring that I was in love with her. Worse. I raged at my unchivalrousness in forcing forward the very thing which would make her already extraordinary situation unendurable. From a chum, a protector, she could accept my hospitality; but not from a lover.

I was beginning to discuss with myself whether it would be better to live my indiscretion tacitly down or to promise her solemnly, as I placed the cushion behind her shoulders, that I would never offend again, when I saw a sight which made my heart stand still.



CHAPTER II

OUT of the sea of wheat something black and clumsy heaved up for an instant into the light, like a porpoise shouldering through the sunlit ripples of a tidal river, heaving up and plunging down, appearing, disappearing, re-appearing in unexpected places.

At its second emergence I knew it for the head and shoulders of a man. At its third, I saw that the man was diving and pushing towards the spot where Lethe sat under the great elms.

I knew that it was Canuto. Instinct told me the truth. Even if I had seen his features, instead of only the back of his quickly-hidden head, I could not have been more certain that it was he.

Gaining, at a single leap, the left-hand boundary of the garden, and keeping myself well within the cover afforded by the triple line of shrubs, I was able to reach the edge of the corn-field unseen by either Canuto or Lethe. All unsuspecting of the wolf, my lamb was still leaning back, quietly, looking up into the heaven with eyes from which the trouble had not quite vanished.



VIRGINIE

Before I could leap the low hedge and rush to her side, the wolf broke out of the wheat. Murder was in my heart, and my first impulse was to spring at him like a greyhound, to grip him by the throat, to wring his accursed neck, and to fling him back into the wheat as foul black food for the foul black carrion-crows. But some kind power held me back.

With most unworldly grace, Canuto stole behind Lethe's chair, and laid his two fine hands over her two blue eyes.

I was near enough to see her cheeks flush crimson, and her lips close tight with vexation, and I knew that she thought it was I.

He stooped and murmured a word or two in her ear, and, though the sounds were inaudible, I knew that he was saying 'Guess,' or 'Who is it?'

She did not answer. He lifted his hands, and bounded as lightly as a cat to a recess in the great, flower-bright hedge, where he could not be seen from the bungalow.

She sat up, with a little cry. To my unutterable relief I saw that, although she was startled, she was not terrified. She did not seem even displeased. But my thankfulness swiftly gave place to bitterness and jealousy. I almost hated her for not hating him. Why did she not recoil from him as from an ogre, and scream aloud to me for help?

He stood among the sweet honeysuckle and the snowy convolvulus, beaming upon her with a

THE WHEAT

smile so frank and winning that, if I had not already found him to be a lying impostor, I should have believed that it was the smile of a good man. I looked at Lethe, and saw that she was once more struggling to remember; but this time only half of her memory seemed to be disobeying her, and with the other half she grew almost radiant at this new meeting with an old friend. In a sudden surge of rage, I felt that she cared more for him than for me, and that if he beckoned she would follow.

The thought that he was about to tear her out of my world drove me mad. But only for one blood-red, reeling moment. Pride, and will, and bodily strength returned to me ten-fold, and I burned to shew Canuto, full in Lethe's sight, who was the better man.

From the point where I stood hidden among the shrubs there was a choice of two courses. I could either dash through the low hedge in front of me and charge along boldly under the elms to the place where Lethe was sitting; or I could scale the board-fence to my left, drop down into the meadow, and scud noiselessly along the other side of the great hedge-row, so as to head them off as they tried to escape over the locked gate at the northwest angle of the corn-field. It flashed upon me that as I had no weapons save my fists, while Canuto was sure to be armed, my only chance lay in springing unexpectedly across their path. This decided me. I climbed the fence.



VIRGINIE

Slinking stealthily alongside the giant hedge, within twenty seconds I was crouching at the bottom of a dry ditch, whence I could peer through the briars at their every movement and hear their every word. The tall nettles stung me in a dozen places, but I found fierce pleasure in the envenomed pain.

Lethe was opposite to me, sitting bolt upright, expectant, a little excited. Canuto's profile was toward me, and he had pushed himself so deeply into the hedge that if I had had a dagger I could have driven it through the flowers and thorns right into his heart, and could have drawn back my torn arm drenched equally with his blood and my own.

'Don't get up,' he commanded, as she made a slight movement. 'Don't move. Stay where you are, and don't make a sound.'

He spoke French, in low, but penetrating tones. As if she had been repelled in a free-hearted moment of affection, she sank back a little, hurt and disappointed.

'Answer me quickly,' he went on. 'Are you happy here? Speak softly.'

'Yes,' she said, "I am happy.'

'Quite happy? You are sure?'

'I am sure. Happier than ever in my life before.'

I distinctly heard his long sigh of relief. His face brightened, and he emitted an odd little grunt of what seemed to be honest delight.

'Good,' he said. 'Good. But I knew I was

THE WHEAT

not mistaken. Tell me, though — are you tired of it? Do you want me to take you away?’

Her face — my beautiful Lethe’s sunny face — clouded over with alarm.

‘No, no!’ she cried, as my heart suddenly began throbbing like a steam-engine, and the hot blood rushed to my cheeks and temples. ‘No, no! Please don’t. Please leave me here. Don’t take me away.’

If he had laid a masterful hand upon her, or had opened his mouth to bid her follow him, I would have smashed a way somehow through the barricade of brambles to fight for her to a finish, once for all, there and then. But he neither moved nor spoke. He simply stood and regarded her with a satisfaction so patently free from lover-like fondness, that my murderous jealousy, to which her ‘No, no! Don’t take me away,’ had already given the death-blow, expired utterly and without a struggle. I still distrusted him and disliked him heartily, because his designs had become more inscrutable than ever. But the hatred of him passed for awhile out of my soul. I could not hate any man, however black a scoundrel he might be, who was capable of a moment’s uncalculating delight at Lethe’s happiness. And, as I ceased to hate him, I ceased also to fear him. Now that I had heard her pleading cry against our being parted, Canuto dwindled in my eyes from a giant to a dwarf. He shrank down from a mysterious terror to a puny annoyance.



VIRGINIE

‘One question more,’ he said at last. ‘He . . . he respects you?’

I could not help marvelling at the infinite delicacy of his manner. The words, his tone, his glance, combined to make his meaning plain; but no saintly, high-born cardinal could have put the question to the proudest and purest of princesses with more consummate tact or with more reverence for her maiden innocence. Nevertheless she coloured violently, and turned away her head.

‘Of course he respects you,’ added Canuto reassuringly. ‘If I had had half a doubt about my man, do you think I would have left you here for a single moment? He respects you, does he not?’

So softly, that I had to strain my ears to listen, she answered simply:

‘Yes.’

‘I must go,’ he said more brusquely. ‘He must not find me here. Don’t tell him that you have seen me. Not one word.’

‘Stay!’ she cried. ‘I don’t understand. Where have you come from? Why must you go? When will you come back? And why may I not tell him that you have been here?’

He stepped quickly forward, and knelt low by her chair, on the side which could not be seen from the bungalow.

‘Too many questions, little one,’ he said kindly, stroking her cheek. ‘She will find it hard to be patient, and obedient, and trustful, I know.’

THE WHEAT

But she must try. She must be good. Some day she shall know. Meanwhile she must forget everything — save being happy.'

She gazed earnestly into his eyes.

'It is hard,' she said; 'but I will try. Only ——?'

'Yes?'

'Only promise me one thing.'

'One thing?'

'Yes.'

'What?'

She clung with both her hands to his shoulders.

'That you won't take me away,' she cried.

He smiled.

'I won't take you away to-day,' he answered.

'No, no,' she pleaded; 'that won't do. Promise that you won't take me away . . . ever.'

'But what if some day you want to go?'

'I shan't. Promise.'

He smiled again, shaking his head.

'Promise,' she persisted. And, after a pause, she added. 'Promise, at least, that you won't take me away till I want to go.'

To my amazement, he said:

'I promise.' And, before I could believe my ears, he rose from his knees, printed a light, swift kiss on her forehead, and dived again into the corn.



CHAPTER III

LONG before Canuto had finished burrowing his way through the corn I was back among the shrubs, clutching Thycke & Thynne's cushion to my pounding heart. Twice I caught a glimpse of his furtive head and floundering shoulders before his whole body rose for an instant into sight, flung itself against a weak place in the further hedge and disappeared.

I drew a few long breaths, to steady myself for the meeting with Lethe. I remembered how Canuto had bade her be silent about his visit, and I was determined not to force her to speak until she chose.

All the same, my heart went on pounding, and my brain seemed to be churning round in my skull. That Lethe was as pure and guileless as I had pictured her seemed doubly and trebly sure. And at the recollection of her words to Canuto my nerves tingled and the blood raced in my veins. Without a suspicion that I was near, she had proclaimed herself happier with me than she had ever been before; and she had pleaded, almost with tears, that we should not be parted all our life long. Not that love had spoken in

THE WHEAT

those pleadings. I was under no illusion. I knew that the happiness which she had shrunk from losing was no more than the happiness of an affectionate nature coming after storms to the haven of a perfect comradeship in idyllic conditions. But at that moment I hardly cared that she did not love me. It was enough that she wanted to stay with me, and that I could have her at my side and love her always.

But Canuto? Whatever his game might be, it loomed more devilish than ever. His final promise to Lethe had been too lightly given, too swiftly followed by his flight, for me to regard it as anything more than an easy stopping of her mouth. In his strange way, I had seen that he was fond of her, with a kind of paternal fondness. But I resolved not to soften towards him, or to be deceived. His deep-laid, unsearchable scheme could not possibly be other than villainous; and yet, to promote it, he had not hesitated to thrust the tender young girl he professed to care for into a frightful peril.

Following hard upon the first, my second thoughts drew out his treatment of poor Lethe into a more favourable light. With sudden pride, not in myself, but in my country, I recalled the confidence which so many educated Frenchmen still have in the unfailing chivalry of an English gentleman when the woman in the case is a damsel in distress; and Canuto was just the sort of genius to take magnificent risks and rush to incredible extremes. His shrewdness in read-



VIRGINIE

ing, human nature had shewn him that, by theatrically investing a young Englishman with a romantic charge most flattering to his self-esteem, he had placed Lethe in safer hands than any duenna's or ancient gentlewoman's.

But what about myself? I had befriended Canuto, as a stranger in trouble, and what was his response? To serve some selfish or scoundrelly end of his own, he had not hesitated to force me full in the path of an inevitable, and maddening, and life-long passion, although he intended, without doubt, to spirit Lethe away the moment it suited his plans. I smiled cynically to myself at the thought of the fellow's gratitude; and I chuckled grimly as I renewed my oath to outwit and vanquish him after all.

It has taken more minutes to write down these thoughts than it took seconds to think them as I drew breath among the shrubs. Moreover, my watch astonished me by proving that barely ten minutes had elapsed since I first left the corn-field to find her the cushion. But I had evidently been absent quite long enough to fill Lethe with anxiety, for I saw her rise from her chair and stand upon tiptoe, eagerly looking towards the kitchen door. Lest she should divine that I had been watching, I slipped back along the lines of shrubs, and chose a moment when her head was turned to leap upon the gravel path, and to begin crunching along it as if I had just come out of the house.

She met me at the low hedge and said:

THE WHEAT

‘I thought you were never coming back.’

Despite my resolve to betray no knowledge of what had just happened, I felt an uncontrollable jealousy welling up in my heart. It was not jealousy of Canuto. It was a mad rage against the unknown thing that had come between us, joined with horror at the thought that my faultless, angel-pure Lethe was about to begin acting a long-drawn lie.

‘You thought I was never coming back?’ I echoed, harshly, and almost mocking her. ‘Well, what if I had not come back? Would you have been sorry?’

She opened her eyes wide, and stared at me in amazement and pain.

‘Why do you speak to me like that?’ she demanded.

It was not that I wished to be cruel. On the contrary, my resolve not to catechise or suspect her came back stronger than ever. But somehow, when I tried to speak, and smile, and put her at her ease, my tongue was tied and my lips stiffened.

We faced each other in silence. I saw her lips quiver and her sweet blue eyes brim with big tears. Then pride began to battle with anguish. She drew herself a little higher, and her tears shone brighter because scorn was kindling behind them.

To behold her, so small, so frail, so friendless, standing out so bravely to fight her battle, melted my heart. All my jealous love turned suddenly



VIRGINIE

into pure pity; and, not as her lover, but as her protector and friend, I took a step towards her, and held out both my arms.

She recoiled in a blaze of pride. But our eyes met. Hers searched mine, like a hunted deer's, with an unutterable appeal for pity. Then she ran to me like a heart-broken child, and fell sobbing against my shoulder.

I enfolded the poor, trembling little lamb in the gentlest of embraces, holding her to me only closely enough to support and comfort her. Night after night, ever since the day when I drew her from the death-cold ice, I had dreamed of holding her once more in my arms; and time after time the prospect had intoxicated me. But, now that the happiness had come to pass, the moment was drained empty of passionate ardours and filled full with peace. She had run to me like a child to its mother, yearning to pillow herself against some great, soft, human tenderness. And I was content.

So light was my clasp that, when her sobs ceased, she slipped free without a struggle, and turned round to gaze over the wheat. I drew her arm through mine.

'I was a brute,' I said in her ear. 'I am always giving you pain.'

'No, no,' she said eagerly, but without looking at me.

'I have hurt you twice this afternoon.'

'You did not mean it,' she answered, almost inaudibly. 'You are always good and kind.'

THE WHEAT

Then, making a brave effort, she turned to me a tear-stained face, and added, 'Shall we go back to the house?'

'Here is your cushion,' I said, without tact.

'I know,' she answered; 'but I don't want to stay out here any more. Can't we go back to the house?'

'Of course you can,' I said; and, keeping her arm in mine, I led her through the gap in the privet to the path up our own garden.

As we walked along towards the bungalow we did not speak; and, try as I would, I could not fight down a reviving bitterness. The devil sent seven imps whispering and jabbering through the chambers of my brain, and I could not seal my inward ear against their evil hints. Why had Lethe wept so promptly and amply? Had it all been a woman's ancient strategy of tears? And why had she turned me back from the corn-field? Was it that she did not wish me to perceive the mouth of Canuto's tunnel through the wheat-stalks, and to ask awkward questions about it?

But I gave the devil his answer. That is to say, I gave him the lie direct. The unworldly sweetness of her trustful moment in my arms rushed over me, as fragrant and holy as incense, and I despised myself for not scattering the jabbering imps more swiftly than lightning. With a great glow of pride, I took a final resolve to be her true believer and worshipper and defender whatever might befall. I prepared my-



VIRGINIE

self to be confronted by a hundred riddles, a thousand mysteries, but henceforward there should not be one ghost of a doubt or one shadow of a suspicion.

Not knowing what I did, I pressed her arm hard. We had reached the rustic bench beside the rose-clad arch. She halted abruptly, and said:

‘Can we sit down here?’

I crammed the cushion into her favourite corner, and we both sat down. I waited for her to speak. At last, gazing fixedly at a lily which rose a few yards in front of her, she began:

‘Sooner or later all happiness comes to an end.’

She spoke in a curious, impersonal way, as if she were no more than a kindly looker-on at her own sorrows. A platitude rose to my lips, but I swallowed it, and asked:

‘Have you been happy here?’

She turned to me slowly, and met my gaze.

‘Yes,’ she said simply, ‘I have been happy here — very, very happy.’

‘You make me proud and glad,’ I answered. ‘You are good to say so.’

‘I only say what I mean and feel,’ she said, fixing her gaze once more upon the lily.

‘But tell me,’ I begged, when her silence had lasted nearly a minute, ‘Why do you say that our happiness is at an end?’

‘Because it is.’

‘That is no reason.’

THE WHEAT

'It is more. It is a fact. I know it. I feel it.'

'What do you know? what do you feel?' I asked gently. And when she made no response, I took her hand in mine. 'Tell me,' I urged. 'If this is indeed the end, it means even more to me than it means to you. For ten days mine has been the greater happiness, and mine will be by far the bitterer loss. I'm giving a selfish reason, I know, but when it affects me so much, ought you not to tell me?'

Without resentment, but very decisively, she disengaged her fingers from mine, and clasped both hands round her knee.

'There are . . . several things,' she said.

'Tell me one.'

'You ought not to have . . .' she began, but stopped short.

'Ought not to have . . .?'

After a long pause, she blurted out:

'It spoils everything that you should . . . make love to me.' And she blushed deeply.

'Do you truly believe that I could have helped loving you if I had tried?' I asked.

'That is not the point,' she said, reasoning as clearly as a debater, because she had the crystal simplicity of a child. 'You could have helped . . . shewing it.'

Our next exchange was equally brief.

'Are you angry because I love you?'

'No, not angry. Only sorry.'

I did not think at the time that it was old-



VIRGINIE

fashioned to a degree which she might have found ludicrous, but, as if it were the only thing in the world to do, I knelt down on the grass beside her and looked up into her face.

‘Why are you so sorry?’ I asked.

She glanced at me for less than a second, and then turned away her eyes.

‘It is because you love somebody else?’ I went on, though I knew it was not true.

‘No!’ she cried, flashing upon me indignant eyes.

‘And you are sure you can never love . . . me?’ I asked, taking both her hands, and holding them firmly, while I gazed intently into her face. But no love-light in her eyes answered the fires in mine. Instead of love I read in her face only perplexity and grief.

‘If you care for me,’ she said at length, ‘you will want to please me. You will speak no more like this. Get up. Sit down beside me. I said that there were . . . other things. No. Do not argue. Let my hands go. Please!’

At the news that she was going to tell me ‘other things’ my heart leapt. In one flash I saw why it was that my wooing of her since she sat down on the bench had been half-hearted, charmless, clumsy, unmasterful, and, to tell the truth, a little ridiculous. The reason was that her secret was still dividing us, and that I could not rush in and carry her by storm so long as my spirit was balked by a mystery. Inwardly glad to be rescued from my own blunder, I got up and

THE WHEAT

sat down quietly at her side, to share the secret at last.

'Do not speak till I have done,' she began, looking into space.

I obeyed. But it was a long time before she went on:

'I hardly know where to begin. One thing after another becomes clear, then it fades away. And it hurts me so, trying to remember.'

This time the silence which followed was so protracted that I was about to beg her not to torment her poor wits till some other day, when she looked round abruptly, and demanded:

'You. How much do you know about me?'

I was taken completely aback. My first silly impulse was to put her off with the compliment that I knew she was the loveliest and best creature in the world. Then, by a revulsion of feeling, I almost opened my mouth to tell her the whole story of Canuto and Nicolo, and the block of ice, and the silver trumpet. But I reined myself up in time, for I felt suddenly certain that Lethe had not the faintest inkling of my having nursed her beautiful, ice-cold body back to life amid the smoke-clouds and perfumes of Canuto's powder and the shining of his potions.

She mistook my indecision for blankness.

'I thought as much,' she said. 'You know nothing.' And with hands re-clasped across her knees she resumed her gazing into space. When she spoke again, it was with even greater unexpectedness and vehemence than before.



VIRGINIE

‘What right have I to be here?’ she demanded.

‘As much right as I,’ was my swift answer.

She sprang to her feet, and stood facing me.

‘I will know the truth,’ she cried. ‘Whose house is this?’

‘It is yours and mine.’

She stamped her foot, and repeated imperatively:

‘I say, whose house is this? Do not jest. Is it yours, or is it ——?’

The end of the sentence died on her lips.

‘Is it . . . whose?’ I asked, determined to probe the mystery there and then, although my heart bled at the sight of her mortified pride and cruel bewilderment.

She seemed to put her whole soul and body into a supreme effort to make memory do its work. She failed, and her eyes filled with tears.

‘Why am I here?’ she asked at last, ceasing to command, and beginning to plead almost humbly. ‘Who brought me?’

Bidding all my wits to the task, I answered, without suspicious delay:

‘A friend brought you, and I promised to take care of you.’

‘A friend of yours?’ she asked with eagerness.

‘A friend of us both,’ I replied, remembering that she still believed in Canuto, and recoiling from telling her too soon that he was a scoundrel.

‘What was he like?’ she begged, more eagerly than ever; and I saw no reason why I should not tell her.

THE WHEAT

'He is older than I am — a dozen years older, at least,' I said. 'And darker. But thin, and not so tall.'

'With black hair — rather long black hair, and a black moustache?' she interjected.

'Yes.'

'And small hands — fine, small hands?'

'Yes; with small hands.'

She sat down again, lost in thought. But I did not give her a chance of putting further questions which might overstrain my ingenuity. So I plunged in boldly with a bantering retort.

'You are forgetting, dear mademoiselle,' I said, 'that you were going to tell me "several things." Instead of telling them you keep on asking questions. More. You commanded me not to speak till you had finished, yet you're making me do more than half the talking.'

She started out of her reverie.

'Come,' I added, rallying her with a smile, and trying a bold stroke; 'It's your turn to answer. I've told you his height, his size, his colour, his shape, and all about his hair, and his moustache, and his pretty little hands. You have guessed who it is. Tell me his name.'

Looking me fairly and squarely in the face she said simply:

'I don't know.'

Half defiantly, half appealingly, she searched my eyes. For a second or two she may have found in them amazement and disappointment; but, at the sight of her ordeal, so vast a tide of



VIRGINIE

tenderness arose in my heart that I knew she could not mistake my long gaze of boundless trust and pity. At her words the mystery had increased ten-fold, but my love had increased a hundred-fold.

First with wonder, then with gratitude, still she searched my eyes. Her lips moved, but before she could speak there was a loud ring at the front-door bell.

CHAPTER IV

To be sitting out in the sunset, and suddenly to hear the dim and empty house behind one's back begin resounding with alarm-bells would be an uncanny experience at any time. But, with Canuto's baleful nearness darkening the air, the noise plucked me from the bench as if someone had fired a gun. Lethe, too, started and turned pale.

'It's he!' I said.

'I know, I know!' she answered.

'He's come to take you away,' I muttered in her ear.

'No, no! He promised he wouldn't.'

'His promises are nothing. Tell me, do you want to go?'

'No!' she cried, springing up and clinging to my arm. 'Don't let him take me away!'

I half pushed, half drew her into the house. The door of my study was ajar.

'Will you be afraid,' I asked, 'if I put you in here and lock the door?'

The room was dusky, and as she pressed against my shoulder I felt a little shiver run through her.



VIRGINIE

But she tripped boldly across the mat, and replied:

‘Of course I shan’t be afraid.’

‘There’s nothing to be afraid of,’ I said. ‘Now, sit down in that big chair, and don’t make even the faintest sound. I shan’t be long.’

There was another pull at the bell. I stepped out of the room, turned and withdrew the key, and darted into my bedroom for a revolver. With the weapon in my pocket, I strode loudly along the hall and flung open the front door.

It was Mrs. Hipkins.

The fighting front which was intended for Canuto, along with my abrupt and defiant throwing open of the door, struck terror into Mrs. Hipkins’ heart. She cried out, and lurched forward almost into my arms.

‘Oh, sir!’ she panted, leaning against the doorpost to recover her wits and her breath.

‘I’m afraid I frightened you, Mrs. Hipkins,’ I said. But although I firmly believed that Mrs. Hipkins was incorrupt and incorruptible, I kept a quick eye for any Canutos who might be loitering about the road, and a quick ear for any sound from the study.

‘Frightened me, sir!’ echoed Mrs. Hipkins. ‘Lor’ forgive me, sir, but y’ nearly skeered me out o’ my life!’

‘I’m really very sorry. To tell the truth I was expecting somebody else. But what’s the matter? What can I do for you?’

‘Nay, sir, nay,’ objected Mrs. Hipkins; ‘it’s

THE WHEAT

t'other way round, sir. It's what can I do for you, sir?'

'For me? Why, nothing. When I want you I'll send for you.'

Mrs. Hipkins' face fell. She looked up at me awkwardly, reddened, and fidgeted with the brass knocker.

'Askin' pardon, sir,' she said at last, 'but I kep' the brasses nicer nor this.'

'You did all your work very well,' I answered. 'And whenever I want someone again, you may depend I shan't send for anybody else.'

She glanced up with grateful but puzzled eyes.

'Then you ain't got no-one else in my place, sir?' she demanded, breathing hard.

'No. Certainly not. Why should I?'

Mrs. Hipkins did not attempt an answer. But, after more fidgeting, she tried a question instead.

'Mester Barrison,' she began, 'beggin' your pardon — if I'm not makin' too bold — can I come in and speak to y', just a minnit, private like?'

I could not conceal my unrest. She misread it.

'I've not come askin' for money,' she added, raising her head proudly. 'No, and not for no bits o' things, neither. You've alwus paid me 'andsome, me and my 'usband too.'

'I didn't think anything of that kind, Mrs. Hipkins. But I'm so busy. Can you say what you've got to say in a couple of minutes?'

'Lord bless y', sir, yes, and in 'arf the time!' protested Mrs. Hipkins.



VIRGINIE

She followed me in, and I shut the door. We went through to the kitchen. Mrs. Hipkins looked at the orderly plates, and bright pans, and clean floor in astonishment not unmixed with suspicion.

‘Well, I declare!’ she exclaimed, ‘and me thinkin’ it must be a perfick pig-stye!’

‘It’s been fine weather, you see, Mrs. Hipkins,’ I explained uneasily. ‘I’ve been feeding out of doors — cold stuff, ready cooked, from Griggs’s.’

‘And a lot o’ good it’ll do ye,’ snorted Mrs. Hipkins, finely scornful. ‘Not that it’s me as oughter say nothink against the Miss Griggses, seein’ my own mother was nurse to ’em both. Yes, and married from over the same blessed shop, which is more than neither o’ them old maids ’ll be. God forgive me for sayin’ it. No, sir, askin’ pardon, a gentleman o’ your age, working ’ard with the ’ead, needs a nice bit o’ steak, or a nice little ’ot loin o’ lamb, or maybe a nice boiled leg o’ mutton with caper sauce, or a nice lean chop, or p’raps —’

‘Quite so, Mrs. Hipkins,’ I cut in; ‘but what was it you wanted to say?’

Retrieving herself with difficulty from the rushing flood of her own eloquence, Mrs. Hipkins eyed me uncomfortably.

‘Well, sir,’ she mumbled, ‘the kitchen’s well enough, I must confess. But there’s the dining-room, sir . . . and your bedroom.’

‘Go and peep at them,’ I retorted.

THE WHEAT

She inspected the bedroom, and came out into the hall with an air of mingled relief at the cleanliness of my surroundings and resentment at my having got on so well without her. But time was flying; and, although the last of the light was beaming into the dining-room, I knew it must be growing dim and ghostly in the study. I kicked open the dining-room door impatiently, and walked in, with Mrs. Hipkins in my wake.

The room looked, and felt, and smelt delicious. Through the open windows light puffs of air came to meet us—cool, clean air, blowing through the roses. On the black oak sideboard, which stood out sturdy and glossy from the white walls, a few pieces of silver and cut glass shone and sparkled. The floor was covered with closely-woven straw-coloured matting.

Mrs. Hipkins moaned faintly at all this old-fashioned rustic sweetness. But at the very moment of her moan I caught sight of something on the matting which brought the blood to the tips of my ears.

The thing was a hair-pin.

Until I saw it, I had not known that when a long black hair-pin, with curly ins-and-outs interrupting its two long black sides, gets itself deposited upon a pale-gold background, it becomes the most patent and insistent sight in the world. It looked as bold as a tarred anchor lying on yellow sand. By an instinct of self-preservation I took a great stride forward and put my foot on it.



VIRGINIE

‘Now, Mrs. Hipkins,’ I said in a hurry, ‘I hope you’re satisfied?’

But Mrs. Hipkins was not satisfied at all. On the contrary, she entrusted her considerable bulk to the top step of the little library ladder by the book-shelves, and proceeded to wipe away a tear.

‘Come, come,’ I began.

‘Oh, sir,’ wailed Mrs. Hipkins, ‘I declare it’s beautiful! But I *did* think I was givin’ satisfaction.’

‘So you did, Mrs. Hipkins, always.’

‘Thank y’ kindly, sir, thank y’ kindly. But beggin’ pardon, I can see as far through a brick wall as other folk. I know what you’d be meanin’ to say, sir, but y’ don’t say it because you’re too kind to ‘urt folks’ feelins. You’re meanin’ that I was too clumsy — too ‘eavy-’anded. You’re meanin’ you wanted things kep’ kind o’ prettier-like, and more genteel and stylish.’

She looked reproachfully at Lethe’s well-ordered sideboard. Hoping to profit by her distraction, I stooped down swiftly to pick up the tell-tale hair-pin; but she did not give me time.

‘Lord ‘a mercy!’ she gasped. ‘To think o’ me sittin’ on these ‘ere steps and you standin’ all the time, sir!’

She rose up, and added:

‘Not another word do I speak till you’ve sat yerself down, sir.’

Outside the four corners of the hearth-rug there are not many spots in a dining-room where a man can stand bolt upright for a long time

THE WHEAT

with pleasure and dignity, and the spot occupied by my boot and the hair-pin was certainly not one of them. Even before Mrs. Hipkins I began to feel ridiculous.

'I haven't time to sit down and talk, really Mrs. Hipkins,' I said, rather stiffly. 'You forget I could only spare two minutes.'

'I ask your pardon, humbly, sir,' said Mrs. Hipkins, her poor, rough cheeks suddenly chilling with bleak disappointment. 'I'll be going at once, sir. But one thing I will say, sir, though I says it as shouldn't. I mayn't be as natty with the fal-lals and ornyments as a parlour-maid, no sir, nor even as a cook-general, but I *did* go into the corners.'

'Mrs. Hipkins,' I said, 'I tell you, once for all, you worked splendidly.'

'Then why have I lost the place, sir?'

'You haven't. When I want anyone I'll send for you.'

Mrs. Hipkins screwed her lips together, lifted her Sunday black skirt, and began exploring an occult pocket. By degrees she brought up to the pit's mouth, a half-sovereign, two half-crowns, a florin, five sixpences, and two halfpennies, and laid them on the sideboard.

'Then, if you please, Mester Barrison, there's your own back,' she said, with hauteur. 'Nineteen shillings and sevenpence. When you came last Monday night, and paid me a pound in advance, there wasn't nothink said about my not comin' to work 'ere again any more. With my



VIRGINIE

deep respex, sir, I don't want nor need your charity. There was fi'pence owing for soft-soap the last Thursday I was 'ere. I'll thank y' kindly to count the change, sir.'

'Mrs. Hipkins,' I said, as soon as I could, 'you are a lady. But don't be thin-skinned. Don't take offence when none is meant. So long as you're kind enough to keep the post, you're the only housekeeper I shall ever engage in Brattle. Put those few shillings back in your pocket. They're yours, not mine. If I happen to be too busy just now to put up with any disturbance, such as cleaning the house, surely that's my own affair. Certainly it's got nothing to do with your wages.'

For a brief spell her face brightened. Then it became oddly earnest and mysterious, and she advanced towards me with stealthy steps, as if the walls had ears. So portentous was her on-coming, that I involuntarily began a movement of retreat. But I remembered Lethe's hair-pin in time, and kept my ground.

'Mester Barrison,' she said, in a loud whisper, 'I'm on'y a poor body, and I know I'm takin' a great liberty. But I've been talkin' it all over with 'im.'

'Him?' I echoed, aghast. Canuto rose before my mind's eye, and I cursed him body and soul. 'Him? Who is it you mean by him?'

'Mr. 'Ipkins — my 'usband.'

I drew a deep dreath of relief. She went on.

THE WHEAT

'I told 'Ipkins all about it. And he said straight out: "I'll bet my feet the poor young feller's up a gum-tree!"'

'Up a gum-tree?' I repeated, bewildered. Too many and too long sojourns abroad had kept me disgracefully ignorant of my native country's slang, both home-grown and imported.

'I ask pardon,' said Mrs. Hipkins, penitent. 'In a manner o' speakin,' it's a kind of an expression, as you might say, among the likes of us poor folk. It means "stoney."'

'Stoney?'

'Yes, sir. "Up a gum-tree" means that you're broke and haven't got no money. That's what 'Ipkins said — them very words. And I declare 'e was fair 'eart-broke.'

'My dear Mrs. Hipkins —' I began. But she shut me up.

'There, there,' she pleaded. 'I know I've forgot my place. I know I haven't no business to be talkin' so to a gentleman, and me only a poor charwoman. But what did I say to 'Ipkins, this very same blessed Sunday, when we was sittin' down to our bit o' beefsteak-and-kidney pudd'n'? "'Ipkins," I says, "He may take offence or he may not, but the poor boy hasn't got no mother nor father," I says, "and as soon as I'm washed up and dressed I'm goin' straight to the bungerlow," I says. "Here we are, eatin' the best of everythink," I says, "and him p'raps goin' short, although he's give me his last sovereign," I says, "for doing nothink 'cept to

VIRGINIE

keep away and not see him scrapin' and savin'," I says.'

Mrs. Hipkins finished chokily, and made a gesture as if to embrace me. Had she done so, I should have been only physically offended. It was impossible to stand cold and unmoved before so warm and free an outrush of priceless human kindness. I tried to speak, and could not.

'No, sir; not one word,' cried Mrs. Hipkins, with motherly imperiousness. 'It's proud and happy I am to serve y'. Beginnin' to-morrer, I'm comin' every mornin'. When you've turned the corner, like, and got your money, you can pay me, and if you can't never pay me another penny piece — Well, it'll be all the same. As for the nineteen and sevenpence, I can't think of keepin' what I haven't earned.'

I drew out my pocket-book and shewed her the ten five-pound notes which I had made a point of carrying, in case of emergencies, ever since the morrow of Lethe's arrival. I said:

'Mrs. Hipkins, you're a downright brick. I shan't forget all this till my dying day. But, thank God, you're wrong. Look here. And there are plenty more where these came from. If ever you need one of these bits of paper, remember I'll share with you, just as you wanted to share with me.'

She edged away from me, positively disappointed that she could not sacrifice herself on some motherless boy's account. When she spoke again it was almost sulkily.

THE WHEAT

'Then why can't I come and clean the 'ouse?' she demanded.

'You can,' I answered.

'To-morrer?'

'No. Not to-morrow.'

'I'll scrub the kitchen quieter nor any mouse would do it,' she coaxed.

I shook my head. Perhaps the shaking gave a jog to my brains, for I had a bright idea.

'If you want to help me,' I said, smiling, 'you can go into my bedroom —'

'Yes, sir — Go into your bedroom?'

'— And find two pairs of clean socks on the left-hand side of the middle drawer. They've got little holes in the toes.'

'Of course they 'ave, sir. In the 'eels, too, I'll be bound, without a soul to look arter 'em.'

'No,' I said, foolishly. 'The heels are all right. But the toes aren't. Now, will you take them home and mend them?'

'Take 'em home? Bless your heart, why should I? If it's only the toes, I'll sit down and do 'em in a jiffy.'

'You can't,' I said, growing angry. 'You haven't got any wool here, or bodkins.'

'Yes, I 'ave, sir. I alwus kep' a little 'card-board box o' buttons, and needles, and all them odds and ends, inside the ottoman in the best bedroom. I'll run and get 'em at once, sir.'

I thought of Lethe huddling fearfully in the deepening gloom, and I cringed with shame at my witlessness and weakness.



VIRGINIE

‘Indeed, you won’t, Mrs. Hipkins,’ I said warmly. And, by a lucky inspiration, I added, ‘Not on Sunday, in any house of mine.’

At the unexpected spectacle of my Sabbatarian horror Mrs. Hipkins collapsed and was struck dumb. I seized the advantage.

‘Do them on Tuesday,’ I said boldly, knowing I could find ways of putting her off before Tuesday came. ‘Come on Tuesday, as usual. Never mind the socks to-night. You’ve no idea how busy I am.’

‘Busy! and yet you’re going to cook your own dinner, with me beggin’ and prayin’ to ‘elp!’ she said, with ruthless logic. ‘No, sir; now I’m ‘ere I stop till I’ve boiled you a nice little dish of peas to go with the cold meat.’

I groaned aloud.

‘And a nice rice puddin’,’ added Mrs. Hipkins, radiantly, ‘with a stick or two o’ stewed rhubarb.’

‘Mrs. Hipkins,’ I said, with desperate mendacity, ‘just before you came, I ate enough cold lamb, and French beans, and fruit, and biscuits and cheese to keep an ordinary family for a week. If you don’t go, I shall miss the post.’

‘The post’s gone, sir. I saw the postman clearing the pillar just as I rang the bell, sir. Let me wait for the letter, sir, and post it for y’ in Brattle.’

‘Mrs. Hipkins,’ I said, sternly, ‘I can’t stay here another moment.’ Unhappily, however, I couldn’t suit the action to the word. I knew that the only effective course was to stride straight off to the front door, leaving Mrs. Hipkins to

THE WHEAT

follow. But what would have happened to Lethe's hair-pin?

'If I ask you, point-blank, to go,' I went on savagely, so as to end the intolerable silence, 'you mustn't think it's because I'm ungrateful. To-night I am all nerves, and talking upsets me.'

'Of course it do, sir,' crooned Mrs. Hipkins in maternal sympathy. 'But what did I say this very same blessed Sunday afternoon to 'Ipkins? "It ain't natural," I says, "that poor young feller passin' 'is days and nights all alone in that there bungelow," I says, "with not a soul to speak to. It ain't wholesome," I says. "No, Esther," says 'Ipkins, which he meant me, sir, "I shouldn't wonder if he don't go off his bloomin' rocker," which he meant you, sir. That's what 'Ipkins said — them very words. Makin' so bold, and meanin' no offence, what y' want, sir, is to make it up with some nice young lady. 'Taint' natural with no womenfolk to speak to week in and week out. It's morby. 'Ipkins, he says ——'

I forced a boisterous laugh, plunged at Mrs. Hipkins' arm, and hustled her by main force into the hall.

'Tell me what Hipkins says on Tuesday,' I said, keeping up a show of bustling good humour. And, patting her jovially on the shoulder, I managed to chaff, and threaten, and wheedle her out through the front door.

Returning to the dining-room, I found the hair-pin still on the floor, and the nineteen shillings and sevenpence still on the sideboard.



CHAPTER V

'WHAT a pretty coach-horn!' cried Lethe as I unlocked the study door.

She was standing just inside the room, grasping the long silver trumpet.

'Don't be angry,' she pleaded, in answer to my start of displeased surprise. 'I haven't been spying among your dusty old English books and letters. But the drawer that had this trumpet in it was open, and I couldn't help taking it out.'

What she said was quite true. I remembered distinctly that the drawer had stuck late the night before when I was looking for some papers, and that I had ceased rammng at it so as not to awaken Lethe.

'Isn't it pretty?' she asked, looking from me to the trumpet and from the trumpet to me with the simplicity of a child fondling a new toy.

'Haven't you seen it before?' I demanded.

'Of course not,' she replied, amazed. 'How could I, when you didn't shew it to me?'

I changed the subject.

'You can come out of this dark den now,' I said. 'Have you been frightened?'

'No,' she answered. 'I was just a very little

THE WHEAT

bit frightened at first. But I found this and it cheered me up. It's so bright, and it tinkles like a bell. It looks as if it has belonged to an angel.'

'So it has,' I said fervently. And, before she could ask questions, I made haste to add: 'It was a false alarm. It wasn't He.'

'I know,' she retorted quickly and reproachfully. 'It was an old lady. I heard her voice as soon as you opened the hall door. If it had been He ——'

She did not finish the sentence with words; but the sudden gravity of her tone made the meaning plain.

'Don't stay in here,' I said. 'It's too dismal. Let's go into the garden. We must finish our talk, mustn't we? Besides, I want to tell you about the old lady.'

'Must I put this back?' she asked, gazing wistfully at the trumpet.

I hesitated. Then I answered decidedly:

'Yes. I'm afraid you must. It is a friend's. If it were mine, I would give it you this minute, for your next birthday.'

She made a little grimace of disappointment, but obediently carried the trumpet back to the bureau and laid its bright and tinkling length, with a lingering look, into the drawer. Then she followed me to the garden.

'Now, tell me the rest of the tale,' I said, as soon as she was settled once more against the cushion on the rustic bench.



VIRGINIE

The childish happiness which the sight of the trumpet had brought her faded out of her face. She did not speak.

‘When the bell startled us,’ I continued, ‘we’d got as far as this. I had been describing the friend who brought you here — his height and age and hair and complexion and his small hands and so on. My description agreed with some recollection of your own. But you couldn’t call to mind his name.’

I paused in vain for an answer. Her averted face told me plainly how much I was making her suffer; and I tried to persuade myself that my probings, like wounds from a surgeon’s knife, were merciful in the end. But my next question perished on my lips; for she slowly raised her hands and pressed them hard over her eyes and temples.

If I had sat there watching her with hatred rather than with immense love in my heart, I could not have kept her a moment longer on the rack. Instinctively I pushed my arm around her waist and drew her closely to me.

‘No!’ I pleaded, with my lips close to her ear. ‘Let it all go. What does it matter? Forgive me. I was a beast to ask you. But I promise I’ll never name it again. Don’t hide your face. Look at me.’

She endured my clasp and even shrank a trifle more closely against me of her own accord. With my free hand, rough and brown from digging in the sun, I drew down her two white hands

THE WHEAT

from her white young brow and folded them for her in her lap. For a few seconds we sat together so. Then she exhaled a long sigh and drew herself clear of my arm.

'It is my fault,' she said slowly, her eyes bent to the grass. 'I began and I ought to finish. Heaven knows I have tried. But the more I catch at it the more it evades me. As soon as you spoke, the world began to turn round. But I shall be better soon. I know I'm very foolish. Dear friend, be patient with me. Don't speak. Wait. Let me sit here quiet, and it will all come back.'

'No,' I said. 'If it hurts you like this we will do without it. We've had more than enough of disagreeables for to-day. If it comes back to you, some time, of its own accord, you may tell me. If not, let it go.'

She smiled sadly and shook her head.

'Very well,' I said, getting up and looking at her reproachfully. 'I shall have to go and cook the dinner all alone. And you say yourself that I always spoil the artichokes.'

The trick worked. At first she hesitated and shook her head again. Then she threw me one of her open, grateful glances and took the hand with which I helped her to rise.

Over the preparing of our simple dinner I succeeded in amusing her by half-a-dozen displays of British ignorance and prejudice on her pet points of cookery and house-keeping until the traces of the day's doubts and fears had



VIRGINIE

vanished from her pretty face. During dinner, which we ate in the dining-room by the light of one pink-shaded candle, she prattled as artlessly and gaily as ever before. It is true that to my inward vision there were two skeletons at the feast; for was not Canuto in Brattle, and had I not told Mrs. Hipkins to come on Tuesday? But I shut my eyes to both these unwelcome guests, and warmed myself proudly at the thought that Lethe, on her own confession, wanted to stay with me for ever and a day.

We tried to drink our coffee in the garden; but there was a sting of cold in the night wind, and, although I brought a wrap for her shoulders and a rug for her knees, Lethe shivered and we were driven back indoors. For the first time, the house struck a little unhomely. So much of the summer light remained that a bright blaze of lamps would have been unnatural and unpleasant; yet the passages and corners were ghostly. The rooms were too warm for fires; yet the empty grates stared out blank and cheerless. Both of us felt it as we complained of our cold coffee in the square hall where we had first met face to face.

'You promised to tell me,' she said, breaking a rather dreary pause, 'about the old lady.'

'You mean Mrs. Hipkins,' I answered.

She repeated the name after me, slowly. Or, rather, she lingered prettily over her quaint French imitation of the sounds. I had never

THE WHEAT

understood before the barbarousness of our English vowel *i*.

'What a droll name!' she exclaimed.

'Yes,' I said. 'And Mrs. Hipkins is a droll woman. Also, she's very ugly. But her ugliness is only skin-deep. She's as good as gold.' And I told her the whole story, only suppressing the hair-pin.

'She is a good woman,' said Lethe, with conviction, as soon as I had finished. But ——'

'But ——?'

'Why will you not let her come here and work?'

'Because,' I stammered, taken off my guard, 'because . . . well, I didn't think you would like her.'

'Why? Why should I not like her? Because she is ugly?'

'No,' I said, making a clean breast of it. 'Because I didn't think you would like her to see you here.'

The dusk had deepened so that I could not see her face; but I felt what I had done almost as soon as the words had left my lips.

Neither of us spoke. A brake rumbled in the road outside, its load of rowdy trippers bawling the refrain of a comic song. The noise ebbed away till the stillness was perfect once more. Then she made a movement as if to rise from her wicker-chair.

In two strides I was beside her, with a firm hand on her shoulder.

'No,' I said. 'Not yet. I've told you about



VIRGINIE

Mrs. Hipkins. Now I'm going to tell you about . . . about *him*, and about you and me.'

Almost as clearly as a voice from heaven the monitor within me had suddenly commanded that I should tell her all I knew. At first she strove scornfully to shake off my hand. I had pressed near enough to see her eyes and cheeks and to discover that a woman's pride and shame were raging like a fire where a child's gaiety had so lately been babbling like a fountain.

'For God's sake sit still and hear me out,' I said. 'I shall take my hand away from your shoulder as soon as I know you won't run away.'

Her struggle ceased. I let her go.

'That trumpet,' I began, 'that silver trumpet. I told you it was not mine. Do you know whose it is?'

She waited.

'It's either yours or his. The day you came to this house you were holding it in your hand.'

'It is not true,' she cried, hotly.

'In one sense it isn't,' I answered. 'You were holding it in your hand, but you didn't know it. You were asleep.'

'In my hand?' she echoed, after a few moments of thought. This time the anger was gone from her voice, which was full of wonder and terror.

'Yes,' I said softly. 'You were asleep. But don't be frightened. Listen to me quietly or you will not understand.'

I went back to my own chair and drew it to

THE WHEAT

within a yard of hers. I bent forward; she leaned back with closed eyes.

In as few words as possible I told her, first of all, about my digging at the villa and about my conditions of life, Mrs. Hipkins not excepted, prior to Canuto's and Nicolo's call. Then I told her, in order, the various transactions up to her arrival in my car at the bungalow gate. On certain points in the sequel I preferred to deceive her. For example, I left her to believe that it was Canuto, not I, who had drawn her from the ice and laid her upon the couch in the bedroom. I said nothing about the draughts and the powder, but led her to suppose that she had awakened by virtue of her own vitality from her unnatural sleep. Again, I so worded my allusion to her boxes as to imply that Canuto, not I, had caused the trousseaux to be sent from Thycke & Thynne's. Last of all, I boldly invented a tale to the effect that Canuto had remitted, by registered letter from London, a sum of money amply sufficient to defray all expenses on her account till the end of the year.

She listened to the long and cruel story of her wrongs without a word of interruption or comment. Thrice she blushed crimson; once she turned deathly pale; four or five times she opened her eyes; once she covered her face with her hands; and more times than I could count she clutched at her little gold cross as if it could ward off the evil. When I had ended, she asked simply:



VIRGINIE

'Is that all?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Then what are we going to do?'

'What are we going to do?' I cried, springing up. 'Why, we're going to beat him. Whatever his devilish game may be, we're going to win. Trust me for that. Let him do his worst. I shall be ready for him. Be easy in mind. The scoundrel shall never lay a finger on you again as long as he lives!'

'Stop!' she said, sternly. 'It's my turn now. Listen to me. He is not a scoundrel. I have seen him, I have spoken to him this very afternoon!'

'I know you did,' I retorted desperately, stung to madness at her unexpected defence of him. 'I know. I saw him come and go through the wheat.'

'You knew?'

'Yes. I knew.'

'And you pretended you didn't!' she said, scornfully.

'It is false,' I cried. 'You are unjust. What did I say when I came back with the cushion? You are unjust. What was I hoping when you sobbed against my shoulder and again while we sat on the bench? I was hoping and praying that you would speak, and that the key to this hateful mystery should be found, and that there should be no secrets between us any more.'

She started.

'Come; think; answer,' I went on, almost



THE WHEAT

fiercely. 'What do you make of me? You say I've made love to you. It's true. But what sort of love? Have I made love to you like a cur and a coward, basely taking advantage of you because you are young and friendless and in my house and in my power? God knows the answer is "No!" And God knows the battle I've fought, day by day, hour by hour, not to breathe a word or make a sign of what I feel until I saw him sneaking through the wheat and knew that he had come to pluck you out of my life as coolly and heartlessly as he planted you in it. God knows how safe, how sacred, you have been and shall be for ever in my hands. God knows how I worship every hair of your head and every word you speak. God knows. But you don't!'

In my powerless rage and bitterness, I left her side and went and looked out of the window. It was the window she herself had stood at, ten days before, while I lurked in the shadow and watched her dainty form and wondered what would be the colour of her eyes.

Over and above the anguish of our quarrel and my torturing, sickening dread of her imminent abduction or flight, I was conscious of an unutterable humiliation. For the first time in my life I understood that I was a second-rate human being. From the moment of my ungoverned answer to Lethe's unthinking speech about the marble islet in the Ionian sea I had gone on blundering and stumbling like a country booby,



VIRGINIE

although the evening's events had given me opportunity after opportunity of shewing myself a man and a gentleman. At the same time, I perceived how hopelessly outmatched I was in my duel with Canuto. He was as bold and sure and easy as a forest lion — a great, remorseless cat in whose velvet-sheathed claws I was no more than a ridiculous mouse to be sported with, to be let go, to be recaptured, and, finally, to be destroyed whenever the contemptuous fancy seized him. As for Lethe, while I worshipped her more than ever, I suddenly felt that she was like a lithe, lovely little tigress, enduring my affection and purring under my caresses for an hour, but only waiting to leap from my puny grasp at the first call of the wild.

Peering out through the glass at the wan flowers in the chilly twilight, I drank deep of an inexhaustible and bitter chalice. Now that Lethe was his ally, Canuto would defeat me and mock me. Lethe would vanish utterly, and how did I know that even a life-long search would gain me another sight of her face? I looked forward into a future as black and cold as an Arctic winter, with hoarse birds of evil croaking at me from the gloom — at me, the man who was a size too small for his destiny.

Something soft and warm and fragrant took silent possession of the narrow space at my side. It was Lethe. She had stolen from her chair, and, almost before I was sure of her presence,

THE WHEAT

she was leaning beside me, with her elbows on the high, deeply-recessed window-sill and her chin sunk in her white hands. When she spoke it was to ask, very earnestly:

'Are you sure God knows? He knows that you do really love me as much and as beautifully as all that?'

'If there's a God at all,' I answered, with as much earnestness as her own, 'He knows.'

She gazed out for a long time at the ghostly lilies. Then she said, with a softness and sweetness and kindness that I had never dreamed could well forth from so young and light a heart:

'That good Madame Hipkins — was it true what she said? Is it true that you have neither father nor mother?'

'It is true,' I said. 'My father died years ago, and I never saw my mother.'

She slipped her arm through mine and lightly touched my hand.



CHAPTER VI

My hand closed upon Lethe's and crushed it until she cried out. Within and without the solid world seemed to rock. At the miracle of her touch I should not have been surprised if the twilight had flared up into a blazing noon, or if the moon-white lilies had kindled into full-orbed flame-bright sunflowers. It was as though a fountain, long sealed and forgotten, had broken out amid the dry places of my heart and was brawling through my brain like a torrent in the mountains. Whirling upon its breast, my courage came shouting back. Henceforth I would be the lion, and Canuto should be the mouse. As for Lethe, she was an angel, still wrapped about with holy mystery, but bestowing grace and might by her lightest touch.

'You hurt me,' I heard her say. But, although I gripped her less fiercely, I did not answer. She had come back to me, and I would never let her go.

At length she said, in low, excited tones:

'Hush. Listen. You have made me remember. I remember a great room with a window looking over dark pines and yellow sand-hills

THE WHEAT

to a dreary grey sea. It was raining. I was playing with a big doll — nursing it, and laying it in its cradle, and covering it up with warm wraps because the day was so dull and cold. And there was a woman in the room, sewing. She looked across at me and said to another woman, "Poor little one; she has no mother!"

I held her hand more closely.

'Don't speak,' she went on, with growing excitement. 'I remember an altar in a chapel. Don't speak, I say. It is coming back to me. It was the chapel of a convent. I remember. I was there years and years, at school. The altar was an altar of the Blessed Virgin. She was tall and beautiful and gracious, in a robe of white and blue, with a crown of gold on her head and the good God in her arms. There were palms in brass tubs, and hundreds of roses in vases. I can see myself now — kneeling down, in white, to light a candle, and to say a prayer. And I can see an old priest, with white hair, touching me on the shoulder. I can see him pointing at the image, and I can hear him saying: "Ah, how much you ought to love her — the only mother you have."' "

Her breast heaved and her voice broke. I saw at once that the excitement of her self-discovery and the painfulness of her recollections were too much for her, and I opened my mouth to dissuade her from the pursuit.

'Be silent, I tell you,' she commanded sharply. 'I remember more. I can see a room over-



VIRGINIE

looking a harbour with graceful masts and stumpy, many-coloured funnels. I know it was a town of France; but it was new, and noisy, and busy, and without fine great churches — not like any town of France I ever saw before. I remember I lay on a couch, oh, so weary, and dressed very warmly. There were two men there. I remember asking if I might take off my long cloak, lined with furs. He said “No.” Then the other man brought me a glass of wine — strange wine, looking as if they had mixed white wine with red, but pleasant to smell and to taste. I drank it all, and asked for some more, but they said “No.” I remember feeling very drowsy. The first man said: “That’s right. Go to sleep. To-morrow you will be with your best friend.” He went on talking; but I was half asleep and I didn’t understand. All I remember is that the second one said: “Poor child!” and that the first one answered: “Just now, she is the living image of her mother.”

She stopped abruptly and clung to me in terror.

‘That’s all,’ she panted. ‘That’s all . . . But . . . but the first one was —’

‘It was he!’ I cried.

‘Yes. It was he!’

The strain was over, and she gave way utterly. I threw my arm about her and held her again, lightly, but strongly, just as I had held her in the corn-field.

‘Come, come,’ I murmured, smoothing back the hair from her forehead and trying to comfort

THE WHEAT

her. 'Do not fear. He shall not do you any harm.'

'What do I care for harm?' she cried wildly. 'It is cruel — cruel — cruel! What have I done? What does it mean? What will come next? What will be the end? It is cruel, cruel!' Then, with a sudden lowering of her tone to an awe-struck whisper, she pressed to me and moaned, 'I am afraid.'

'Put fear away, you poor, poor child,' I pleaded. 'With me you shall be safe.' And when she shook her head and tried to give vent to fresh terror, gently but irresistibly I drew her to me till her white face was buried in my shoulder. And so I held her until the worst of her horror was over-past.

Three or four minutes flowed by. Then, with the quick return to calmness and self-mastery which I had seen in her before, she stepped away from me and leaned with her back against the window-sill.

'I am not afraid of . . . him,' she explained, speaking rapidly. 'You were wrong. He is not a scoundrel.'

'What is he then?' I asked. 'And who?'

She shook her head.

'I cannot remember,' she said. 'I don't know. But I know this. I know that when I knew things — I know that when I could remember — then, I knew that he was kind and good.'

It was my turn to shake my head.

I persisted. 'Suppose he alters his mind brought you here unconscious. He has secrets, strange powers. He caught you in the wheat-field. What if some morning should be found in a magic sleep once more? And what if, in the midst of it, he comes and claims you as his lawful property? What to say?'

She considered, with downcast head. When she spoke, she had changed the subject.

'I was explaining,' she said, 'that I am afraid of him. I'm afraid of this mystery, dreadful forgetfulness of what I am and where I came and whither ——'

'You shall answer me here and now,' I advancing to her side and looking earnestly into her eyes. 'Here and now. If he comes to you away . . . what am I to say? What to do?'

I repeated the question twice or thrice. At last she raised her head bravely and said:

'We must speak plainly one to another. mean . . . do I love you?'

I tried to protest that I did not, at that moment. mean solely or mainly what

THE WHEAT

'Have it so, then,' I answered, meeting her eyes. 'Tell me plainly. Do you love me?'

'Dearest friend,' she said, softly and sadly, 'I do not. I mean, I do not love thee with the love they talk about in poems and romances.'

'Perhaps,' I retorted, 'it is only in the poems and romances that such love exists at all.'

'Do not say that,' she chided. 'We know, both of us, that it is not true. I have never felt such love, either for thee or for anyone else; but I believe it comes once to everybody in the world.'

'Yes,' I said. 'It has come to me.'

She stepped out and sank into a chair — not her own chair, but mine, whence she could speak to me as I stood — and said:

'Be kind, dear friend. Do not be angry. Although I do not love thee in that greatest, best way . . . thou art dearer to me than any other being in the world. Nowhere else have I been so happy as here. No. Obey me. Stay where you are, where you cannot see my face.'

She dropped the sweet French 'thou' and 'thee' and went on more quickly.

'When I came through that bedroom door, the first evening,' she said, 'why was I not afraid, or abashed, or tongue-tied? I cannot tell. All I know is that I fought with memory, the moment I saw you, and I was beaten. But, in some strange way, I seemed to know you through and through, in a flash. Perhaps it is memory that keeps souls apart. Who knows?'



VIRGINIE

Her thought, so strange and mystical, dazzled me by its unexpected, unworldly brightness; but she expressed it casually, as if it were less than nothing, and continued:

‘Once or twice, at first, I was lost in bewilderment and tormented by curiosity. I was dying to ask you thousands of questions about yourself and myself, about the past — yours and mine — about this strange position. But you blent your life with mine so naturally and fully that the questions died before they reached my lips. You did not question me; why should I question you? You were not curious; why should I be restless? Besides, along with memory, everything seemed to have gone away from me save my body and my mere soul. I have lived here day by day, minute by minute, without care, almost without thought, believing it would go on for ever, like a happy child in a dream.’

‘And now,’ I said, ‘you are a happy child in a dream no longer. You are an unhappy woman awake.’

‘I am awake? Yes,’ she said.

‘And unhappy?’

She did not reply.

‘If you fall again into a trance or magic slumber,’ I asked doggedly, ‘and he comes for you, what do you want me to do?’

‘Supposing he had come on Friday,’ she retorted, ‘or yesterday, or any other day before we had this talk? If he had claimed me and tried to take me . . . what would you have done?’

THE WHEAT

'Killed him,' I said. 'I have answered your question. Now answer mine.'

'My answer is: When he comes do not kill him.'

She saw my gesture of impatience.

'Forgive me,' she said. 'I shall not fall into a trance or a mystic sleep. But if I do — if he should claim me — Refuse!'

I sprang to her side; but she hurried on:

'Refuse . . . till I awaken.'

'And when you awaken —?' I demanded.

She rose up and drew me back to the window where there was just enough light for her to see my face.

'Dear friend,' she coaxed. 'I say once more, be patient. If you had not interrupted me, I would have told you. Look me in the eyes.'

I looked her in the eyes.

'First of all,' she said, gravely, 'we ought not to have lived together all these days in this house like this.'

'That is neither your fault nor mine.'

'It is neither my fault nor thine. But it ought not to have been.'

'It cannot be altered now.'

'No. It cannot be altered now.'

I was vaguely wondering how she could be, at one and the same time, a child and a woman of the world, when she went on:

'The next thing is this. I do not love thee. But, dear friend, there is no one else with whom I should so love to be in love. If I stay here . . .



VIRGINIE

will you promise there shall be no word of love till I give the sign? Are you strong enough to promise that? And if I come to know that I can never love you . . . will you suffer me to go my way?’

‘Love or no love,’ I said, ‘you shall never go through these doors without a protector. If you cannot love me, at least you will not refuse me leave to serve you.’

‘You will always be my truest friend,’ she said, gently. ‘But one thing at a time. If I stay here . . . are you strong enough to make that promise?’

‘This time,’ I said, solemnly, ‘it is I who will ask that I may look into your eyes. Listen while I tell you a secret. You have spoken of churches, of convents, of altars, of images, of candles. I was not brought up to respect such things, nor to believe in what they stand for. But, while I knelt beside you last Sunday morning as the priests were singing Mass . . . I swore a great oath by the God you believe in that I would revere and guard you as sacredly as if you were that Blessed Virgin to whom you knelt and prayed. Look into my eyes and see if I am speaking true.’

‘You are speaking true,’ she said. ‘Now ask me your question again. “When I awaken” —?’

‘If he should come to claim you,’ I repeated, radiantly, ‘I am to refuse, until you awaken. And, when you awaken, you will say —?’



THE WHEAT

‘When I awaken I will say to him: “Tell me who you are. Tell me who I am myself. Tell me why I am here.”’

‘And, if he claims you?’

‘If he claims me, I shall say to him, in your presence: “Unless you prove to me, and to this my friend, that I am bound by honour and duty and religion to follow you . . . I stay here!’

Her reservation stabbed me to the heart. But I tried to murmur words of gratitude and to draw her just once more to my arms.

‘No,’ she said, wrenching herself free. ‘Your promise begins now. Besides, there has been too much of this to-day. If you weren’t kind and good I shouldn’t forgive you. Good-night!’



CHAPTER VII

IN spite of my unusual pains in locking and bolting all the doors of the bungalow, I found it impossible to settle in my own room. Not that Canuto would have found it easy to invade Lethe's chamber. Her windows were of the casement type, with small square panes of greenish glass strongly framed in lead and iron; and, as abundant air poured in through two long swung-sashes above, from the very first night I had taken the precaution of fastening the casements so that they could not be opened without a tremendous noise, even from the inside.

But I knew that Canuto was infinitely resourceful. A man who could palm off living flesh and blood as so much mere wax would not be thwarted by a few pence-worth of screws. Accordingly, I threw off my boots and quietly carried the hair-mattress from my narrow bed along the hall as far as Lethe's door. I rolled up my coat for a pillow, stowed the revolver beneath it, and lay down to sleep.

Outside, a little band of pious sweethearts loitered homewards, singing softly, 'O Day of Rest and Gladness, O Day of Joy and Light!'

THE WHEAT

I thought of the day's excursions and alarms and almost laughed aloud. To begin with, on setting out to church at Westhampton in the morning, we had only just succeeded in dodging the milkman as he returned collecting cans. In the streets of Westhampton itself, our car had bumped within twenty inches of Miss Evans — Thycke & Thynne's own Miss Evans — on her way to chapel with a very inferior young man. And, after tea, there had been the breathless sequence of excitements beginning with Canuto's dive through the corn and ending with the confidences provoked by Mrs. Hipkins.

I could not sleep. Nevertheless, as the dimness and the stillness healed my nerves, I began to look back over the day with exhilaration. True the honeyed idyll was over; but, instead of murmuring because it was ended, I gave marvelling thanks that its sweetness had been drawn out so long. Indeed, I felt relieved that it was over. If I meant to win at Actium there must be a term to silken days and moon-soft nights upon the dreaming Nile. After our week of Arcadian peace and delight, my blood began to stir for Homeric battle and revenge. Briseis was in my tent, and I would hold her against all the gods and all the heroes.

By degrees, drowsiness bemused me. A confusion of facts and fancies paraded before my closing eyes. I saw myself stepping from hair-pin to hair-pin, like a child in a game, with Mrs. Hipkins dinning into one of my ears and Canuto



VIRGINIE

jesting into the other. I saw the very inferior young man of Westhampton saucily driving my car, while I walked dejectedly along the pavement with a clinging and affectionate but fallow and ancient Miss Evans. I saw a galley, with bellying sails, its broad prow smashing the violet water into creamy foam as it steered for the blinding surf of a marble islet. I saw three priests, in white and gold, saying Mass, while an angel, enveiled in a sky-blue misty vesture, blew Lethe's long, bright silver trumpet. Last of all, I saw Lethe herself, nestling quietly in my arms — so quietly that I knew she loved me.

The sharp ping of a belated cyclist's bell recalled me to consciousness. I noticed that the hall was growing cold, and began to debate with myself whether it was worth while stealing back to my room for a rug. But the debate ended, abruptly.

Somebody, or something, was scratching or shoving wood-work.

I sat up and listened. The noise had ceased. But I knew I was not deceived. Perhaps a mouse was at work.

Almost immediately it began again. This time I discerned that it came from the other side of the front door. The sunk panels, with the almost empty hall behind them, served as a sounding-board. Someone was trying to break in.

More stealthily than a cat I got up and advanced on bare and noiseless feet to a position

THE WHEAT

just beside the bolts and lock. It was like Canuto's effrontery — I had never realised the fine meaning of the word until that moment — to choose the front door for his raid; but, all the same, I wondered how he could be fool enough to attempt it. Even if he or Nicolo had succeeded, on the day of their visit, in arranging for the manufacture of a false key, he might have guessed that a door with such a treasure as Lethe behind it would be not only locked, but bolted.

I applied my ear to the lock, but there was no creaking or elinking of a key in its wards. The soft noise had its origin nearer the middle of the door.

Suddenly the brass trap of the letter-box, which was made to close by a rather powerful spring, opened inwards. A finger and thumb held it open at one end. Then a whole hand, stretched out quite flat, was pushed through the slit as far as the wrist. In the faint beam of light which bleared through the opening, I saw the hand move strangely to and fro, like the hand of a dead man laying the house and everybody in it under some hellish spell. An almost uncontrollable impulse urged me to seize it in a grip of steel and to wring it and tear it from the fiend's arm that had thrust it through. But, as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, I made out that it was the small, fine hand of Canuto.

The long nervous fingers searched here and there until they encountered the cage of steel wire which did duty for a letter-box. The hand



VIRGINIE

disappeared; and I guessed that Canuto, before dropping a letter or packet through the slit, was making sure that there was a box or cage or basket to prevent its falling to the floor with a crash. My guess was correct. First, a square white letter, and, second, a small brown packet came crawling like live things over the brink. They seemed to pause, scared, like timid acrobats, before they took a header into the net. The finger and thumb were withdrawn so gradually that the brass oblong closed down again over the slit almost without a click.

I do not know whether there would have been time to turn the key and thrust back the bolts and tear open the door before Canuto got clear away. In his own phrase, there was and there wasn't. But an instinct even stronger than that which had prompted me to seize the weird white hand held me back from the pursuit and chained me beside the white letter and the brown packet.

CHAPTER VIII

My study window could not be seen from the road. Therefore it was to the study that I crept to read Canuto's letter and to open his packet by the light of a candle.

The letter ran thus:

BRATTLE,
Sunday night.

MY DARLING LIONEL,

As I happen to be excogitating a sorely-needed pamphlet entitled 'The Cultivation of Cereals in European Countries Comparatively Considered,' I had occasion this afternoon to examine the fairly creditable field of wheat which is all a-growing and a-blowing behind your house. And, upon emerging from between a corn-flower and a poppy, whom should I stumble upon but your security!

What a little world it is, to be sure!

I thought she looked exceedingly well — far



VIRGINIE

weller than when I saw her last. You seem to have looked after her nobly. All the same, you really oughtn't to leave her about in corn-fields. She might get stolen. How would you like it yourself if you pledged a pet watch and afterwards found that the pawnbroker had left it out all night among the geraniums? A word to the wise is enough.

And now, darling, bear with your poor Canuto as he approaches the ungentlemanlike subject of money. I am informed that, under your heaven-born English laws, a living and breathing security (such as an ox, or an ass, or a talking parrot, or a performing dog, or a calculating horse, or an unfrozen lady) cannot be redeemed for the mere amount of the original loan until the borrower (or borrowers) have repaid to the lender (or lenders) the cost of such ox's, or ass's, or parrot's, or dog's, or horse's, or lady's sustenance, nutrition, aliment, grub, or keep. Accordingly, I find it out of my power to relieve you of Lethe just now. But, although I cannot repay the principal, I am determined to deal with the costs. Enclosed you will find the sum of six pounds, six shillings and sixpence.

The six pounds and six shillings represent Lethe's twelve days' bill, en pension, at your excellent and well-conducted establishment. I am aware that she would have fared better in many a French hotel at eight francs a day; but I am aware, also, that living is dearer in your country on account of Free Trade.

THE WHEAT

As for the sixpence, I am sorry that I do not happen to have two threepenny bits in order that I might replace, with the least possible inconvenience to yourself, the two examples of that ill-fed but well-bred coin (so interesting to the alien numismatist!) which you have doubtless been good enough to advance to Lethe, on the two Sundays of her stay, for the purposes of the Collection.

Thank you, I enjoyed my trip and am quite well. I sincerely trust you are the same yourself. Hoping very soon to renew the honour and pleasure of your acquaintance.

Believe me, your

CANUTO.

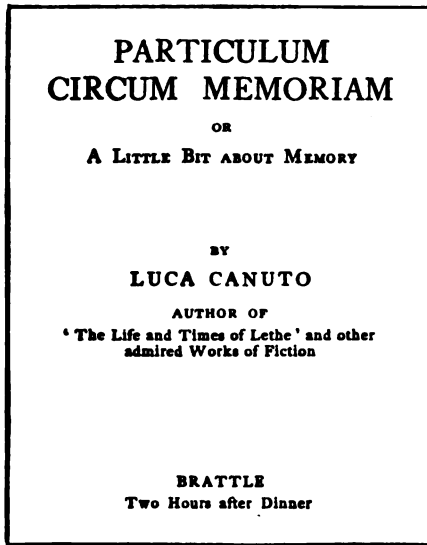
Wrapped up in a hundred-franc note were two sovereigns, three florins and a bright new sixpence. I crammed them into my pocket with a snort of anger.

Canuto's meaning was plain. He did not choose to be under the slightest material obligation to me. He intended to snatch Lethe away; and, once she was gone, no doubt he would think to end the affair, so far as I was concerned, by returning my original five pounds with a mocking letter of thanks. I dropped both paper and envelope upon the rug and took up the brown packet.

It contained a small book — a twin to the book which I had found packed up with the powder

VIRGINIE

and the potions. The title-page was lettered, with many a flourish:



I turned the leaf and read:

CHAPTER I

'Memoria res damnosa jocosa est.' Memory is a damned funny thing.

Gentle Reader, tell me true. Has it ever happened to thee as to thy servant the Author?

Oftentimes I have sat at meat in witty company. The best of stories has rushed into my head, and I have sat, nursing it on the tip of my tongue and waiting for some bore to stop his cackle.

THE WHEAT

Suddenly the bore stops. But some one else strikes in with a single sentence. And when silence falls — Memory has cheated me! My tale is gone! And I sit, retracing deceitful clues and cudgelling my wits in vain, until the beautiful lady on my right ceases to love me and my host wonders if I have found a gooseberry-skin in the champagne.

CHAPTER II

Everybody in the world has had this experience at one time or another: —

You are recalling a name. It comes boldly forward almost to the front of your brain; when, prestissimo! the very breath with which you are about to pronounce it blows it away!

CHAPTER III

Have you heard of the Etruscan warrior; how he lay, mail-clad, for more than two thousand years, on a stone couch in his painted tomb; and how he softly lapsed into a few pounds' weight of dust the moment his discoverer admitted the light and air through a new breach in the wall?

CHAPTER IV

Memory works like an exquisite machine; and, like an exquisite machine, sometimes it stops. A cog breaks; or a wheel shifts on its axle, a hair's-breadth to the left or a hair's-breadth to the right.



VIRGINIE

There are machines as big as railway-engines, as delicate as watches. When they get wrong the Fool cannot re-start them with a crow-bar; but the Man Who Knows merely gives one tap with a hammer in the right place, and off they go.

What if stoppages of memory can be studied, explained, controlled, multiplied, caused, or cured like stoppages of an infirm heart?

For example, what if some scoundrelly foreigner, by some devilish hypnotism or some infernal drug, could throw a pretty French girl's memory out of gear?

CHAPTER V

He could and he couldn't.

And, if he could, it doesn't follow that 'twas he who did it.

FINIS TRACTATUS

LUCAE CANUTONIS

DE MEMORIA

That was all.

I picked up the fallen letter and wrapped it, along with its envelope and the book, in the brown paper. Then I blew out the candle, picked up a rug, and stole back to my bivouac outside Lethe's door.

On the whole, I was eased in mind. An hour or two before, leaning on the window-sill and staring out into the twilight, I had felt like a raw stripling, helpless and hopeless in the iron

THE WHEAT

hands of the strong man Canuto. But Lethe's touch had sharpened my wit as well as stouted my heart; and, as I lay down and pulled the rug snugly about me, I perceived with satisfaction that Canuto was making the fatal mistake of under-estimating his opponent. If it amused him to poke fun in dog-Latin at my sham scholarship, certainly I did not grudge him the entertainment. It was Brattle's fault, not mine, that I was reputed a learned antiquary. The chaff was wittily worded; but he would laugh best who laughed last.

Lying on my back in the dark, I ran over as much as I could remember of the little book, with its five so-called chapters on Memory. After all, it added nothing to my knowledge. It practically confessed that a sacrilege had been foully committed in the shrine of my Lethe's soul, and that her most sacred hoards of joy and sorrow and love had been looted, like holy vessels from a plundered temple. But I had known of all this long before Canuto pushed his absurd tract through the door. I decided that the book might be neglected, and that the letter alone called for close attention.

Three formidable facts emerged from the golden haze of Canuto's jests and sarcasms.

Canuto was in Brattle.

Canuto had money.

Canuto had made a point of paying Lethe's hotel-bill, as he called it, not merely up to this Sunday, but up to the coming Tuesday.



VIRGINIE

From these facts, singly and in various combinations, I gradually drew several conclusions. First, it was obvious that the fellow had not returned to Brattle for nothing. Second, he would not hang about Brattle any longer than he could help. Third, he could not possibly be sure that I was in love with Lethe, or even that I wanted to keep her. That I should admire her tremendously was inevitable; but it did not follow that I would not be glad to rid myself of a guest whom most people would find even more embarrassing than charming. Fourth, he had thrust the so-called expenses upon me by letter so as to absolve himself from explanations at the moment of his taking her away.

Taking her away! I clenched my fists under the rug and set my teeth. How would he attempt it? By stealth and stratagem or by open demand? And when? Perhaps to-morrow. But, as I recalled once more the man's glittering impudence, along with the fact of his payment for twelve days' *pension*, I felt sure that his attack would be delivered on the Tuesday.

My blood warmed as I took up the challenge. I flung off the rug and half arose as if to spring at the throat of a thief already at the door. I resolved to meet stratagem by stratagem, mine by counter-mine. If it came to a frontal attack, so much the better. In a contest of wits, I swore to be so watchful and prudent that, at the worst, the issue should be a drawn battle; but, in the event of a fair, stand-up,

THE WHEAT

man-to-man fight I proudly promised myself a smashing victory.

Snuggling down again under the rug, I began to work through all the possibilities of Monday and Tuesday, not excluding the most remote. Whether or not it would be wise to shew Lethe Canuto's letter was doubtful. On the one hand it might frighten her; on the other, it might sting her to some fatal activity on her own account.

The corn-fields, and perhaps the garden also, would have to be declared out of bounds until the battle was over. Lethe had not complained at being shut up in my study when Mrs. Hipkins—

At the mere recollection, the name of Mrs. Hipkins clanged in my brain like a cracked tocsin proclaiming fire and blood. And, along with the name of Hipkins, boomed the twice-accursed name of Tuesday.

I was beaten.

For Canuto, nay for a dozen Canutos, even if each separate Canuto commanded a legion of devils, I was ready and eager. But Mrs. Hipkins . . . No! There are limits even to a hero's courage.

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead. The ludicrousness of the position made it all the more unmanageable. I know that many a mediocrity has been able to bear himself with dignity to the very end of a magniloquent tragedy; but only a genius can carry off a tragedy which is streaked with screaming farce. With Mrs.



VIRGINIE

Hipkins in the bungalow on Tuesday, all would be lost. Yet there were no tactics upon which I could absolutely rely to keep her out of it. I cursed the way the world was made as I realised that Mrs. Hipkins' motherly benevolence was about to become the deadliest ally of Canuto's black-hearted villainy. It was as much as I could do to refrain from cursing Mrs. Hipkins herself for a preposterous, meddling, obstinate, fussy, pig-headed old woman.

The dining-room clock chimed half-past midnight. And, a minute or two later, light streamed in over my baffled wits. I had found a plan — a plan so sound, so complete, so promising, that when one o'clock struck I was not awake to hear the chime.

CHAPTER IX

It was Lethe, not I, who suggested that we should drink our milk and coffee in the dining-room rather than in the garden.

As she sat down, facing me, I saw that she, too, had spent part of the night in fears and brain-rackings. My two or three sallies of forced gaiety failed to bring back her high spirits; so I pushed my bowl aside, and began to unfold the plan.

'Last night,' I said, 'you set me on fire with delight and gratitude because you said that you would stay here.'

A tremor of her long black lashes shewed that she knew something was coming.

'What would you think,' I went on, 'if I told you this morning that I wanted you to go away?'

The blood ebbed from her cheeks. Her eyes opened widelier. She clasped her hands upon the table, and leaned towards me.

'Not back to . . . *him*,' I said hastily, alarmed at her alarm. 'By Jove, not likely! I mean, would you go away, clean out of his power?'

After thinking it out, she said, firmly:

'No.'



VIRGINIE

'No?' I echoed, astonished. 'You say no?'

'You mean,' she asked, 'will I go away with . . . you?'

'Yes, and No,' I answered. 'So far as the mere journey is concerned, Yes; for you must have an escort, especially in a country where you don't know the language. But, when you have reached your destination, No; I should leave you in other hands. I mean ——'

'Before you explain your meaning,' she interrupted, 'let me explain mine. You asked if I would go clean away out of his power.'

'I did.'

'Suppose I said Yes. If I go clean away out of his power . . . it means that I go clean away from other things as well. I go clean away from the righting of my wrongs, and from the key to this cruel mystery. No. Let me stay here. I have thought about it nearly all night. After the disgrace he has heaped upon me, it is true I should not rush to see him again. I might kill him.'

Her eyes flashed fire, and although she herself did not know what she was doing, her little fingers closed upon the handle of a knife at her side.

'But I can't run away from him,' she went on, scornfully. 'I know there are risks; but if I run away from risks I shall also be running away from the truth. He, he alone, knows the truth about my life. I shall stay here, and make him tell it!'

THE WHEAT

'I see now why you do not love me,' I said, leaning forward and gazing deep into her burning eyes. But she made a gesture of impatience.

'Love!' she echoed. 'No, please! You promised not to speak of it.'

'This once, I must,' I said, keeping my eyes more fixedly than before on hers. 'I say, I understand why you do not love me. If I were a woman, I could not love a man whom I took for a weakling and a coward. I could only despise him.'

'A coward?' she cried. 'What do you mean?'

'What I say. To find out the clue to this mystery — to wrest from that scoundrel the secret of his villainy and of your life — you declare that *you* must stay here. *You* must take risks. *You* must face him, though he may be plotting new crimes against you. But what about me?'

She started.

'What if facing him, and fighting him, and tearing his secret out of him, even if I have to tear his devil's tongue out with it, is a man's work? What if it's mine? And you think I'm too much of a muff and a coward to do it!'

The blood surged back to her face. Impulsively she unclasped her hands, pushed them across the table, and seized both of mine.

'Forgive me, dearest friend,' she pleaded, with wet eyes. 'I am so sorry.'



VIRGINIE

I pressed her hands, and would have kept them, but I remembered our compact, and when she drew them away I freely let them go. For a short space we both made pretence of buttering and eating our rolls.

'You are brave and good,' she broke out, all of a sudden. 'I shall always hate myself if I can never love you. But . . . forgive me! I forgot how true a friend I had. It seems too good to be true that there is somebody who cares for me as much as . . . you.'

'Drink your milk, like a good child,' I said, 'and I will tell you my plan. In these mean times I can't seek him out and thrash the secret out of him without embroiling all of us in sordid unpleasantness. What we need is to get the pull over him. That's why it's necessary for you to give him the slip. The moment he loses track of you, I, too, shall have a secret to bargain with. He'll bluster and threaten, or coax and scheme, but not one hint of your whereabouts will he get from me until he has satisfied us that he has the right to know them. When he says, "Why have you sent her away?" my answer will be, "Why did you bring her here?" To his "Where has she gone to?" my retort will simply be, "Where has she come from?" Besides, when you are not in sight, there are dozens of ways of squeezing him. Leave him to me. I may even make use of the police. Or, if we're alone, with no lady present, I shall take the law into my own hands. But, in any case, I must smuggle

THE WHEAT

you away, and then come straight back to Brattle.'

'Where will you take me?' she asked, a pang of fear stabbing her.

'To some good Frenchwomen,' I answered quickly. 'I have thought it all out. Like most of our little English towns, Brattle is Protestant. But in London there are cathedrals of your religion — cathedrals, and bishops, and nuns, and convents. Tell me: last night you remembered your convent-school: were you happy there?'

'I don't remember,' she said, with a sigh. Then, speaking very slowly, she added, 'No. Wait. Yes, I was happy there. It must have been so. Because, when I remembered it last night, it made me glad.'

'In London,' I went on, 'there are convents where they will take you as a boarder — a guest. Some of them are convents of French nuns — the poor women that the French government has turned out.'

It was not necessary to tell Lethe how I had come to know so much about boarder-welcoming convents of expelled French nuns in London. As a matter of fact, my knowledge was barely a fortnight old, and was derived from Sir Robert Stacke's agent's niece, who had insisted on presenting me with a panicky tract entitled, 'Britons Beware! or France's Gain England's Loss.' When I looked at her, however, Lethe was waiting for me to continue. It occurred to me to test the extent to which her memory had failed.



VIRGINIE

‘You remember the government turning them out?’ I asked. ‘Waldeck-Rousseau? Combes? The Associations Law?’

She regarded me blankly. And yet I felt sure that when the men and measures I had named were fresh in the French mind, Lethe’s was the kind of consciousness to engage with them vividly. The woeful truth was plain. Canuto’s unhallowed arts had abstracted Lethe’s whole store of memories, leaving nothing behind but ingrained habits and tastes in material things such as dress and cookery and scenes of natural beauty, along with the pious practices which fed the life of her soul. But a body and a soul are not the whole of a human being; and, although her mind worked surely and freely on the new topics which I presented to it, its old treasures had been scattered to the winds. As my silence lengthened, she only shook her head.

‘They are good women,’ I said, plunging boldly on, lest she should begin another struggle to remember. ‘And French. We do not need to tell them very much — only that you have no English friends, and that you are seeking complete seclusion and quiet.’

In my own mind I was hardly convinced that the formalities would be so few and simple, but I did not doubt that there were French nunneries in London which would open their doors to Lethe if I went about the job with perseverance and discretion. So, without further details, I demanded boldly:

THE WHEAT

'Will you go?'

She still hesitated. For a moment I was disappointed and angry; but once more she stretched out her hand and took mine.

'If I go,' she murmured shyly, 'will you be safe?'

'Safe?' I repeated.

'Yes. Safe. With . . . him?'

I pressed her hand gratefully, but with a little impatience.

'Safe?' I retorted. 'With him? Of course. But I won't answer for his being safe with me.'

She looked grave.

'Promise me,' she pleaded earnestly, 'that you won't be foolhardy — that you won't take risks.'

'Why shouldn't I take risks?' I asked, smiling to reassure her.

'Because,' she said, more softly still, and with downcast eyes, 'some day I might . . . I might . . . love you.'

I raised her hand to my lips, and kissed it, once.

'Forgive me. I forgot,' I said, when it was too late. 'But, beloved, this time it was you who mentioned love.'

She rose from the table and went to the window.

'When must we start?' she asked, without turning round.

'To-night,' I said, 'after dark. No one must see you at the station, or guess that you have been here. We will go to London in the car. Get all the rest and sleep you can, and, for Heaven's sake, bring only one box.'



CHAPTER X

MONDAY wore away without so much as a false alarm. But this calm before the storm only stiffened me in my resolves. I knew that if Mrs. Hipkins and Nicolo and Canuto were quiet, it was because they were crouching in their several lairs, making ready to spring.

Dutiful Lethe obeyed orders, and compressed her things into one fairly wieldy box. A single kit-bag held my own luggage. In my breast pocket I carefully stowed away a supply of money, and also the two letters and two books which I had received from Canuto.

I was beginning to doubt whether the convent scheme would be easily workable. It occurred to me that a young Englishman, turning up without credentials, and trying to rid himself of an exceptionally pretty young Frenchwoman, who didn't even know her own name, might not find a mother-abbess or a lady-superior in a hurry to oblige him. It might even be necessary to call in the aid of the French Consul. In such a case it would be well to have the most complete collection possible of *pièces justificatives*; so I added to my pocket-book Canuto's Bank of France

THE WHEAT

note for a hundred francs, in the hope that its number might tell tales about his movements in London.

Ought I to take the silver trumpet? In one sense it could prove nothing; and yet the sight of it could not fail to make some kind of an impression upon anyone who might have to listen to my astounding story. Yes, I would take it.

I lifted the trumpet out of its drawer, and leaned it against the study door while I hunted for a double sheet of stout brown paper. But I must have propped it up carelessly, for my back was hardly turned before it slithered along the wood and fell with a loud, musical sound on the tiled floor of the hall.

Lethe came darting out of the kitchen and picked it up.

'It isn't for you,' I teased. 'Not yet, anyhow.'

'What are you doing with it?'

'Packing it up. We oughtn't to leave it in an empty house. It will be safer at my bankers' in London.'

'Look,' she said sadly. 'We have hurt it. See; it is dented by the fall.'

She shewed me a crumpling of the thin, pure silver where the tube had rapped the tiles. I expressed due penitence, and comforted her by saying that a silversmith in town should put it right.

In the afternoon I overhauled the car with extraordinary punctiliousness, while Lethe provisioned it for our voyage. Assuming we met



VIRGINIE

with no mishap, the journey from Brattle to London could be made in five hours. But, although we had arranged to start at midnight, I did not wish to reach the town before it had been brushed and dusted, and therefore our hamper was abundantly furnished with materials for a leisurely breakfast in some sunny nook of the Surrey hills.

We dined very late, so as to shorten the time between ending our meal and beginning our journey — so late that the July light failed, and we had to light the candles to eat our strawberries.

‘To-morrow night . . .’ she began.

‘Yes?’ I said, helping her.

‘To-morrow night, will you be here?’

‘Perhaps. It depends. I shall try.’

‘You’ll be here alone.’

‘But I shall be thinking of you.’

‘You will? Truly?’ she asked, as eagerly as if she were the ardent pursuer and I the coy pursued.

‘I shall think of you,’ I vowed, ‘so long and so hard, that I shall almost see you sitting again in that chair. And you? Will you think of me?’

‘I shall think of you, and pray for you, all day long,’ she said simply. But more self-consciously she added, ‘Because you are so good to me.’

After dinner she begged me to take her for a farewell round of the garden, and although there were perils, I could not say her nay. Arm-in-arm we wandered up and down the paths. We



THE WHEAT

gathered and ate two strawberries, tart and cold in the night air. We sat awhile on the rustic bench. But we did not go through the privet into the corn-field.

As we returned under the arch, I asked her for a rose. Without demur she plucked a white bud from a bush, and laid it in my hand. I received it with reverence. But when, still keeping her arm in mine, I tried to resume the walk back to the house, she held her ground under the arch.

‘Won’t you give one to me?’ she asked, almost in a whisper.

‘If I do,’ I asked, my blood dancing, ‘what will you do with it?’

‘I shall . . . keep it,’ she said.

I broke off a crimson rose, and she took it gently from my hand.





BOOK III
THE FIRE



CHAPTER I

By the time the big bell of Brattle Church was banging twelve, Lethe and I were thudding along the leafy road which links Brattle with the king's highway from London to Westhampton.

It was a moonless, windless night. The last lights had long been extinguished in the few houses we passed, and, had it not been for the dogs which barked at us as we sped by, we might have been escaping from a land of the dead.

I drove cautiously. But Lethe, unused to a car, and perhaps a little terrified by the darkness of the night and the strangeness of the country, pressed so nervously against me, that once I stopped dead to re-arrange her wraps and to coax away her fears. It was under over-arching horse-chestnuts that I halted. The dim green tunnel had retained some of the heat of the long, torrid day, but the warm air was quick with wild scents. The place and the moment seemed made for love; and as I drew her cloak around her shoulders, while she was retying her veil, I was madly tempted to let the whole world go, and to plead that she would give herself to me, as she had given me the white bud, and take me, as she had



VIRGINIE

taken my crimson rose. Perhaps she divined my thoughts, for she drew down her veil in haste, and bade me drive on.

We began to descend the gentle hill which ends at the junction of the Brattle by-road with the main road to London. It was unlikely that other traffic would be about at such an hour, but, with Lethe at my side, I repressed the desire to plunge forward at full speed.

Suddenly a light shone out at the cross-roads forty or fifty yards ahead. Someone raised a great shout. I pulled up close to the light, which proceeded from the side-lamp of a tarpaulin-covered van drawn full across the mouth of the Brattle road. The horse, still harnessed to the van, was feeding with his muzzle well down, among the herbage at one side of the road, while a man seemed to be cutting grass at the other. A second man — the one who had shouted — was standing in the middle of the road smoking.

‘Gipsies,’ I muttered to Lethe, taking her trembling hand. Then I sang out:

‘What the devil are you doing there? What the deuce are you blocking the whole road up for?’

The man who had been cutting grass looked up and straightened his back, but neither he nor his mate answered.

‘Look sharp!’ I shouted. ‘We can’t wait here all night.’

The grass-cutter went to the horse’s head, and made a pretence of rousing the poor beast to drag



THE FIRE

the van out of the fairway. As for the man with the pipe, he remained standing beside the car, apparently looking on lazily while his comrade did the work.

Some fine drops of moisture stung my cheek. At first I thought it was rain. But, by degrees, I became aware that some sweet but overpowering perfume was in my nostrils.

A moan from Lethe cut me like a dagger. I turned towards her. To look at the gipsies she had raised her veil, and her face was ghastly white. Before I could utter a word, she lurched towards me, and swooned away.

I tried to shout, but something was strangling my throat. I hit out savagely with my right arm, but encountered empty air. Then I seemed to see everything grown monstrously large and swaying to and fro. The horse looked a thousand hands high, the van a league long, and the two men taller than telegraph-poles. The road and everything on it rocked from side to side as if it had been the deck of a ship rolling in the trough of the waves. I saw the man with the pipe climb upon the step of the car, and dreamily watched him squeezing an india-rubber ball, bigger than the moon. The strange wafts of perfume swarmed into me like living things, sweeter than honey, and sharper than honey-bees' stings. Strength and will faded softly from me, and I sank into silly sleep.

When I awoke, the car was rushing along a road which I had never seen in my life before.



VIRGINIE

In spite of the dimness, I knew that we were nowhere near Brattle. The trees were grander, and the air less dry. But my surroundings hardly interested me. Lethe's fate and my own plight absorbed all my reviving consciousness.

We were sitting, she and I, on the back seat of the car. My mouth was gagged — not brutally, but with a fine silk gag, fastened so skilfully that although it galled, it did not hurt me. My hands also were bound together at the wrists with a strong black scarf or handkerchief. As for Lethe, I could just make out that she was ungagged and unmanacled. Someone had replaced her veil, and her hands lay free in her lap. She was breathing quickly and heavily, in unnatural sleep, and was lying limp against my shoulder.

On the seat in front sat two men. Now and again they turned enough for me to see that they were wearing goggles, but otherwise they were clad like farm-labourers. Who they were, whither they were taking us, and why they had seized me as well as Lethe, I hardly tried to guess. My wits, like my limbs, were benumbed and aching. The huge, foul, overshadowing fact was that Canuto had beaten me, and that Lethe was in the power of his hirelings. Nothing else was of any account.

The car turned sharply to the left, and hummed through a wood, whose giant trees made the lane as dark as winter. We bumped so badly, that at every moment I expected Lethe to waken; but she slept heavily on. Every bump, however,



THE FIRE

roused me more thoroughly from my torpor, and the more fully I understood what had happened, the more I raged with shame and anger.

One wild plan after another blazed like a squib in my brain. At first I thought of hurling myself forward, so as to knock the driver sideways out of the car; but even if he had had no confederate, I saw that it could not be done. Again, I almost formed a barbarous and desperate resolve to wake Lethe by a cruel stamp upon her little foot at the moment of our first passing a human dwelling, so that her cry might give the alarm; but I recoiled from the brutality of it even more than from its stupidity. In the burning and roaring of my helpless wrath it would have been impossible to devise a cool-witted policy; but I let the devil in me rave unhindered, knowing as I did, in my inmost self, that all the cool-wittedness in the world could not untie the gag or stop the car one moment before it suited our captors and masters.

We sprang out of the stagnant gloom of the wood, and raced up a bare and wind-swept slope. When we reached the top, I could see a stretch of steeply-descending road ahead of us, as straight as a military road in France. To take it at anything under fifty miles an hour seemed more than human nature could stand, and I prepared myself for such a bumping rush through the stinging air as would be certain to awaken Lethe in the first furlong. But just over the brow of the hill we stopped in the black shadow of a solitary oak.



VIRGINIE

The driver dismounted, and slipped round to the back of the car. His partner joined him, and they began fiddling with the mechanism. I could feel that nothing was wrong, but evidently they believed otherwise, and a fierce hope kindled within me. What if they should find it necessary to ask my help? If they did, I would be as wily as a serpent, crawling on from one advantage to another, until they were off their guard. Then, with unfettered wrists, and a tool in my hand, I would stake all on one tremendous outburst, like Samson's with the ass's jawbone. I would —

But time was not given me to think my thought to the end. Without the faintest warning, a pair of hands seized me by the collar, while another pair dived in just under my knees. I was swung over the side of the car as easily as if I had been the hamper which held our breakfast. Two seconds later I was lying full length upon the grass beside the road.

The man who had been driving the car bent over me to see if I was hurt.

It was Canuto.

I tried to struggle to my feet. I fell. I tried to curse him. The gag did its work. In a twinkling he turned away, and he and Nicolo leapt back upon the front seat.

Canuto released the brake, and the car, like an avalanche, tore down the hill.

CHAPTER II

FOR about twenty seconds I could see the illuminated number at the back of the car glowing murkily through the dust and darkness. For perhaps a full minute longer I could make out in front the acute white triangle of light being pushed by its apex down the hill. Then another wood swallowed up everything.

Lethe was gone.

I lay on the grass, stunned, not realising my loss. At the worst, I felt like a man who has been badly punished and ingloriously thrown in the first round of a contest shortly to be renewed. Canuto had beaten me this round; next round I must beat Canuto.

Suddenly the full horror of the night's work burst upon me. This was not the beginning; it was the end. The first round was the last. We had fought to a finish. Lethe was lost to me for ever.

At that moment I could have cursed God and died. I bit at the gag till my lips bled, and I twisted and tore at the silk scarf which bound my wrists until I turned white with pain. But it was all of no avail.

By a supernatural effort I summoned all the



VIRGINIE

powers of my whirling brain to a last council of war. But one after another they answered my frantic 'What can be done?' with a blank and hopeless 'Nothing!' In no case could I hope to be ungagged and unfettered before daylight, and it was possible that ten or twelve hours might pass before anybody found me in so unfrequented a place. Worse. If, by some miracle, I could be set free on the instant, how much better off should I be? Canuto was already miles away. The fleetest horse could not overtake him, and hours before the telegraph could be set in motion he would have made good his escape, with the triumphant completeness which had marked every stage of his fiendish operations. For eleven days my bungalow and I had served his infernal plans. But now he had no further use for me; and although I vowed there and then, simply because I could do no other, that I would live and breathe solely to get Lethe back, what hope was there that I should ever set eyes on her again, even if I tracked her to the ends of the world?

Bound and dumb, I seemed to be gazing into a gulf of impenetrable darkness, a sunless, moonless, starless void, a bottomless pit, through which I must go on falling, falling, falling, down, down, down, for ever and ever and ever. But suddenly the void lived with devils, and the blackness grew lurid with hellish fires. Even the loss of Lethe sank for a moment under the surface of my mind as I thrilled with an immeasurable lust for some unutterable and everlasting revenge.

THE FIRE

I managed to rise to my feet. Out in the middle of the road, clear of the blackberry bushes and long grass, the night air was fresh and life-giving. My hunger and thirst for vengeance were sharp as ever, but rage and despair made way for reason and courage. I spurned myself for having tolerated the thought of lying prone until help came. My hands were tied, my voice was stifled, but were not my feet free?

The thing to do was to follow the car. Against the fact that Canuto's wheels could travel the ground ten times faster than my legs, and that he had already got a three-miles' start, there were several chances on the other side. The car might break down; or Canuto, in his overweening self-confidence, might pull up only five or six miles along the road to enjoy an early breakfast out of Lethe's hamper; or I might reach a village in time to stir up an effective pursuit. In any case, every step I took down the hill would be a step nearer to Lethe.

I strode out. The summer night was dim, not dark, and in a cloud-free expanse of sky to my right a few stars were burning softly. My first half-dozen steps were staggery, like a drunkard's, partly because of my bonds and partly because of the drug which Canuto had so cunningly forced me to inhale. But I pushed on.

Barely a score of yards from the spot where Canuto had dropped me down, a patch of white by the road-side made me start. Pressing nearer, I saw that it was a stiff slab of cardboard measur-



VIRGINIE

ing about three feet by two. My sight is keen, and there was enough light to shew up two or three lines of inscription in letters two inches high.

By kneeling down in the sand, and poring closely over the cardboard, I was able to spell out the words one by one. They were arranged after the fashion of a card of invitation, and ran as follows:—

MR. LUCA CANUTO
AT HOME

Tuesday Morning, July 27, 1906

FIREWORKS, 1.30 A.M.

R.S.V.P.

P.T.O.

Fumbling with my bound hands, I contrived to turn the thing over. On the other side was a boldly-drawn and plainly-lettered map. I made out a circle in the centre labelled 'Top of Hill.' Two parallel lines shooting off to the right indicated the road by which we had come, and were marked 'From Brattle.' Two similar lines to the left enclosed a pointing arrow, and ended in a second circle, inscribed 'Canuto Castle.'

Although I had not a shadow of doubt that his 'At Home' would prove to be Canuto's final and most elaborate insult, and that in luring me to attend it he meant only to goad and mock me, the challenge made me tingle with wild joy.

THE FIRE

There was to be a second round after all. The odds would be a thousand to one against me, but the most unequal combat was better than no combat at all. And, at the very worst, Lethe should see that I was no poltroon to let her go without fighting for her right up to the last ditch.

I scrambled to my feet again, and started down the hill at a run. From the steepness of the road, and from the poor upkeep of the surface, I judged that it was not a main highway. On either side stretched open fields, and, although my eyes had grown used to the dimness, I could not make out a single house or barn glimmering or darkling in the softly-diffused twilight. As usual, Canuto had made his arrangements well.

Near the bottom of the slope, perhaps a thousand yards from the top, the road bored into the dense wood which had swallowed up the flying car so completely as to hide even its brightly-blazing light from my straining eyes. The sand was damp and heavy under the trees, and there was something death-like about the rawness and gloom. I quickened the pace.

At the first turn my heart leapt. A tiny lantern was shining feebly on the left side of the road, about three feet above the ground. As I pushed nearer, I saw that it was standing on one of the stout posts of an open five-barred gate which gave access to a very narrow lane cut through the heart of the wood. Underneath the lantern was a square white envelope, affixed



VIRGINIE

to the gate-post by a pin, and hastily addressed:—

LIONEL BARRISON, ESQ.,
% MR. LUCA CANUTO,
CANUTO CASTLE,
NORTHSOUTHEASTWESTSHIRE,
ENGLAND.

In the sickly yellow beam I perceived that the car had passed through the gateway, leaving broad tracks in the sand. Without further hesitation I struck into the lane. It ascended a pine-clad slope in a bold curve.

At fifty paces or so from the gate I turned my head for a last glance at the comfortable light of the lantern. To my astonishment it moved, and I soon became convinced that its jogging and flickering were due to the fact that it was being carried by a human being.

I made up my mind instantly. I did not choose to be dogged from behind, like a sheep driven along a country road to market. So I faced full round, and stood stock still in the middle of the lane.

The lantern came shaking nearer and nearer. until the dark form of the man who carried it could be distinguished from the impalpable gloom. At the sight of me standing in his path

THE FIRE

he did not slacken speed in the least, but walked straight up to me, and held his lantern against my face.

The man was Nicolo.

After he had satisfied himself that the gag still sealed my lips, he lowered the light to make sure that the silken scarf still bound my hands. Then he resumed his march without a word.

I followed. Very soon he quitted the main track, evidently intending to cut off a long bend in the lane, and clambered up the bank into a path through the trees. With my useless hands I found it difficult to do likewise; but he helped me up with grabs and shoves, which did not seem to be altogether ill-natured. Once, as he stood with the lantern in his left hand, while he held back a low-growing branch with his right, I was able to look into his face; but I looked in vain for the surly hate which had darkened it ten days before, when he had accompanied me from Canuto's lodging to the garage of the Blue Posts at Westhampton. On the contrary, he eased my way, as if there had been some kind of a rough comradeship between us.

The path slanted steeply down and rejoined the sandy lane. Nicolo held my arm in a grip of iron, and set up a blood-curdling sound, like the screech of an owl. He stopped and waved his lantern.

In the silence which followed I felt as if I could hear the heart of the wood beating. A frightened bird flopped heavily from its roost.

VIRGINIE

Ever so far away a dog barked angrily. On the margin of the wood a night-jar sprang its rattle. Close to my side more birds stirred, beating their wings in the brake, with a buzzing sound as of monstrous insects. A bat toppled past me, swinging almost against my eyes. Then a screech like Nicolo's answered him from the further gloom, and once more we ploughed on over fragrant pine-needles and through clinging sand.

The lane ran into a clearing, where by contrast with the shadowy wood it seemed to be almost daylight. The clearing swelled up towards its centre as if we had reached the top of a knoll, and on the highest hump of ground I discerned a broken, four-square tower.

Nicolo headed across the open space until we came close to the creeper-clad wall. He groped along three or four yards, and at last, with a grunt of relief, flashed his light into a deep postern-doorway, barely wide enough to admit a man. He stepped back and motioned for me to enter, but I shook my head. It had occurred to me that these theatrical arrangements might have been planned for ends far more sinister than mere mockery and insult. Perhaps Canuto feared my pursuit and vengeance, and was hoping to immure me in a prison where I would lie until a woodman or a stray tourist or antiquary set me free.

Nicolo merely shrugged his shoulders and squeezed himself into the opening. And he had hardly disappeared before my fears began to look ridiculous. If Canuto's game demanded the

THE FIRE

seizure of my person, certainly he would never have dumped me down at the road-side, leaving me to restore myself to his clutches of my own free-will. If he had designs against my life, or even against my liberty, he could have compassed them simply by carrying me straight on to the ruins and thrusting me into my cell whether I liked it or not. The mystery was deeper than ever, but for that very reason I decided to follow Nicolo.

He was waiting for me inside, and as soon as I entered he proceeded to block up the lower part of the doorway by tugging across it a slatey-looking slab nearly as big as a gravestone. Even with my hands free I could hardly have shifted it an inch.

While Nicolo was puffing and blowing I glanced round. We were in the basement of a stone-built shaft which had once contained a spiral staircase, but all the lower stairs were broken to the height of a tall man's head. The room where I stood might have been twelve or fifteen feet square. In front of me another doorway, wider than the outermost postern, led into the castle or tower proper, but the space beyond was filled full with dead-black, solid darkness, as if it had been a mile underground. There is a darkness which is only negative, a mere absence of light; but this darkness was positive, a palpable and aggressive horror. Yet I peered into it eagerly, as if I believed that by long gazing I should discern Lethe, like a gem burning in the black heart of a mine.



VIRGINIE

Suddenly, without a word of warning, Nicolo swung the lantern high in air and dashed it to the ground. Almost in the same moment he bumped roughly past me, and I knew that he was making for the inner doorway. I stumbled after him, but a gate or door was slammed in my face. I heard the clank of a chain and the big click of a heavy lock.

CHAPTER III

ON the face of it, I was far more desperately posed in the black darkness of a hidden prison than I had been as I lay under the stars on the grassy marge of the king's highway. Yet, somehow, I lost neither head nor heart. The refinement of torture by which Canuto had kindled my hopes of regaining Lethe so as to lure me into a living death goaded me to such a loathing of his devilishness that I was cool with contempt rather than red-hot with rage. By the road-side I had been almost ready to curse God, but in my stone prison I began to have a calm confidence — I, who had never been pious in my life till Lethe came — that the God to whom Lethe prayed did really and truly exist, and that He would work an old-fashioned miracle rather than allow such vermin as Canuto and Nicolo to triumph. Besides, I had a presentiment, almost amounting to certainty, that there was more to follow. In his cat-like cruelty Canuto would be sure to try and torment or enrage me by shewing me my poor, drugged Lethe, or by some other fiendish device. I swore that if I had to bite my tongue till the blood came I would keep cool and bide my time.



VIRGINIE

In his boundless self-esteem there was always the possibility that Canuto would over-reach himself. Or Lethe, my wonderful Lethe, might wake up and turn the tables. Or Nicolo, who had treated me almost kindly in the wood, might suddenly side with me, the moneyed Englishman, against his criminal, gallows-destined master. Again, there was always the chance that game-keepers or tramps or gipsies might drift upon us and kick Canuto's tricky machinery all out of gear.

With my knuckles and finger-tips I prodded at the obstacle which barred me out of the inner building. It proved to be a wooden gate, and was secured by a padlock and chain. In the hope that its old hinges and nails might be rusty, or its posts rotten, I flung against it the whole weight of my body; but it held true.

'Don't damage his lordship's property,' said a voice as soft as a turtle-dove's. It came from the inner gloom, and I knew it for Canuto's. My gorge rose with disgust and hatred, but I remembered my resolve to keep cool.

'Gates cost money, you know,' the voice went on. 'Evidently you haven't read the notice-board outside. Eh? What? It was too dark, you say, to make it out? Well, I admit there's something in that. The notice-board is signed by the noble owner's agent, and it simply states (in white letters on a black ground) that "In the Event of Further Damage to these Ruins or Plantations, the Owner will be Compelled to Regretfully Withdraw from the Public the Privi-

THE FIRE

lege of Visiting the Same." The split infinitive is the notice-board's own; but that's no reason why you should split the gate.'

He paused, then purred on:

'Besides, if we had intended you to get out, why should we have locked you in? Eh? What's that? You don't like the arrangements? My dear chap, who does? Everybody I ever met is dissatisfied about something. For example, I have the surpassing honour of some slight acquaintance with a promising young archæologist in Brattle. You know Brattle? Brattle, near Westhampton, I mean. Don't know it? Bless my soul! Thought all the world knew Brattle. Still, it's no matter. As I was saying, I know a promising young antiquary at Brattle. To tell the truth, he once obliged me with a little loan. Has all he wants. Nice house. Good health. Potsful of money. A beautiful young lady, with blue eyes and black hair, to breakfast with, and lunch with, and dine with every day . . . and what does the silly young ass go and do? Guess. What? You give it up? Of course you do! Actually, the young fool isn't satisfied. He packs up Miss and Miss's clothes, and three dozen sandwiches, and a bottle of Burgundy, and a pot of marmalade, and a silver coach-horn, and half a chicken, and a spirit-stove, and two clean shirts, and a bottle of milk, and a couple of ounces of coffee, and starts off with all the lot in a motor-car at midnight, as if he's flitting without paying the rent! Result: he gets nabbed — blue-eyed

VIRGINIE

Miss, and grub, and bottle of milk, and all — by the very person he's trying to run away from.'

He waited about the length of time which an ungagged and casual listener would have required for the putting of a listless question.

'What's that you say?' he resumed. 'You want to know who the person was, and why my young sprig was giving him the slip? Certainly. Listen. The person was an Italian, a pure-bred Italian, born of French parents on both sides, and speaking English like a native — which is only natural, seeing he's spent nearly all his life in Russia. A downright good sort. One of the best fellows I ever met. So much for your first question. But as for the second — why our pretty youngster ran away from him — I can only answer, Goodness knows! The Italian had simply loaded him with kindnesses; lent him books, and even wrote 'em, so that His Highness shouldn't die of boredom in his deadly dull hole of a Brattle. Still, what would you expect? Youth was ever ungrateful, and shallow, and hasty, and heedless; and I suppose ——'

He broke off abruptly, as if I had cut him short by an audible answer, and when he began to speak again it was quite irritably.

'I do wish you wouldn't keep on interrupting,' he said. 'How can I finish the anecdote when you're for ever pulling me up with questions? You say you wonder how the Italian caught him? That was the very point I was coming to. Our big-hearted Italian divined that his learned young

THE FIRE

colleague had reasons for expecting a mutual friend to pay the blue-eyed Miss a friendly call to-day, Tuesday. More. The big-hearted Italian was providentially enabled, last Sunday night, to cheer the heart of a poor, but honest charwoman as she walked dejectedly away from His Precious Majesty's bungalow. 'Twas little he could do, 'tis true, but 'twas his best. To be precise, the Italian began by telling the excellent woman that he was anxious to see sundry heathen idols recently dug up in Brattle. Next, he asked her when would be a convenient time to find Mr. Barrison at home, and at leisure, and in a good temper. What? You want to know who the deuce is Mr. Barrison? Quite so. My mistake. Beg pardon. Stupid of me. Barrison is His Young Highness's name—the name of the black-haired Miss's keeper. You understand? Good. Well, as I was saying, the Italian begged the charwoman to indicate a suitable time for his visit of ceremony as a fellow-archæologist. And it was at this stage that Divine Providence graciously permitted him to be of some humble use. That is to say, the Italian had the privilege of giving the poor soul his sympathetic attention while she wallowed in the luxury of her woe. His listening comforted her exceedingly. He gathered that she hadn't slept for two nights through thinking that the bungalow was filthier than a pig-stye. The anguish of these vigils, however, had been as nothing compared with her horror and bitterness at finding the whole place cleaner than a new



VIRGINIE

pin. To cut the anecdote short, the worthy creature further stated that it made her heart bleed to think of the poor young fellow without any womankind in the house; that she had arranged to resume her motherly ministrations this day, Tuesday; and that this day, Tuesday, would therefore be an ideal day for the Italian's call.'

He made a longer halt than usual. I puzzled over his elusive sneer, and when he broke the silence, I started at the precision with which he put my thoughts into words.

'Eh? What?' he demanded contemptuously. 'You want to know what that's got to do with it? You say that, unless the charwoman trotted back and told His Eminence all about meeting the Italian (which I admit she didn't), it couldn't possibly influence His Eminence either to hold the fort or to beat a retreat? Really, my dear fellow, really, really! Excuse my saying it, but you're just a little bit dull. You've forgotten your own question. What you asked was merely how the Italian caught him. On this particular point His Chubby Eminence's thoughts, or the thoughts His Chubby Eminence might have had if the char-lady had puffed back again, have nothing to do with the question.'

He seemed to have pushed his head nearer to the bars of the gate, for although he went on speaking in the same tone, his voice sounded nearer and cosier, like a woman's when she reaches the climax of a piece of tittle-tattle.

THE FIRE

'I'll tell you how the Italian caught him. Having been educated in Germany, the Italian's brains were in a very fair working order. Besides, as his maternal grandfather was a Greek, he had quite a nice facility in putting two and two together. After working it out carefully, he found that two and two made four; and, if you care to listen, I don't mind telling you what his four conclusions were.'

I listened.

'First, the Italian took sagacious note of the fact that His Highness had carefully concealed the existence of the blue-eyed Miss from the charming inhabitants of Brattle, his very own char-lady not excepted. From this the Italian inferred that His Highness did not wish his very own char-lady to see the blue-eyed Miss, either last Sunday night, or this Tuesday morning, or any other night or morning whatsoever.

'Second, as I told you before, the Italian had his own reasons for knowing that My Lord expected a visit this day, Tuesday, from a claimant to the black-haired Miss's adorable person. Herefrom the Italian shrewdly concluded that My Lord would either stand and fight or turn and run. And, as My Lord was plainly unwilling to face his own char-lady, the Italian further concluded that My Lord . . . would turn and run. My friend, I hear your grunt of disappointment, and it does you honour. To be frank, I agree with you entirely. So would the Italian. It stung him to the quick to find that his beloved



VIRGINIE

young brother-scholar could be so flabby and shabby as to let a corpulent and devoted charwoman moil through the streets on a sultry morning to keep an appointment with the front door of an empty and locked-up house. Indeed, the Italian, having Castilian blood on his paternal grandmother's side, was led to think somewhat meanly of English chivalry and courage.'

The telegram which was to save Mrs. Hipkins a fruitless journey to the bungalow reposed in my breast pocket all the time he was speaking; for I had written it out before leaving Brattle, so that I should have merely to hand it in at the first post-office we might find open on our run to town. But none the less I writhed and reddened under Canuto's lash. He allowed me a quarter of a minute or so of silence in which to absorb his full contempt.

'Third,' he went on. 'The Italian felt certain that His Honour would not only bolt, but bolt on the sly. After hiding Miss for ten days, like a Circassian beauty in a harem, His Courageousness would surely never dream of taking her to Brattle railway station. No. His Handsomeness would elope with her by car, by stealth, by night, by himself.

'Fourth, the Italian invested a whole shilling in an ordnance map, on the scale of one inch to a mile. I may remark in passing that, having lived a long time in Vienna, he considers that the official maps in this country are inferior in many respects to the famous survey made for the

THE FIRE

Austrian Government. By the aid of his twelve penn'orth of map, he discovered that there is only one way out of Brattle. Close to Brattle itself, it is true that you may choose this lane or that — especially when you are going to church at Westhampton on Sunday mornings — but all the lanes lead at last to the same fork on the road from Westhampton to London. Hence the Italian drew the simple, practical conclusion that all he had to do was to encamp at the fork — and wait. Waiting is tedious; but, having learnt patience during the long winters of a boyhood spent on a coffee plantation at the North Pole, he did not find the hours drag. In due time, or to be exact, about forty-one minutes later, the bird flew right into the net.'

A purr of self-satisfaction rounded off his cattish tormenting. I waited for Chapter Two of this long-spun boasting. Chapter One had not greatly interested me. To know how I had been anticipated and circumvented mattered little now that Lethe's abduction and my own capture were accomplished facts. The past was the past. I cared only about the present and the future — the present, with Lethe invisible, but near, and the future, through which I would only live to seek, and find, and hold her.

I was still calm; so calm that it occurred to me to simulate excitement, and thus draw Canuto into some incautious extreme. I lunged at the gate with my right shoulder two or three times, until rumbling echoes reverberated through the



VIRGINIE

enormous gloom beyond. But Canuto was not to be tempted.

'Gently, gently!' he cooed sweetly. 'Didn't I tell you it was naughty to damage the property? Let that gate alone. Come. I put it to you candidly. What does the notice-board say? Come now, honestly, do you think it's quite fair and square to enjoy your own little pic-nic here to-night without giving a thought to others? If you break the gate, the notice-board will haughtily refuse to allow the next waggonette-load of day-trippers to land. And, in that case, what will the poor things do with their paper bags and orange peel, when they've no ruins to leave them about in? You're selfish. Some people have hearts of flint. I shouldn't be surprised to hear you say that you'd rather see those poor paper bags, which hardly ever get a day in the country, thrown into the dust-bin. Come. Own up. Now wouldn't you?'

So long as he had confined himself to Lethe, and the Bungalow, and Mrs. Hipkins, I had been able to endure him. But this trifling annoyed me. Besides, the night was slipping away. I remembered that Canuto and Nicolo would not wait for broad daylight to complete their escape. Lethe was still close to me, but the minutes of opportunity were flying. My mind was as bare of plans as ever; but, to bring things to a head, I charged at the gate more thunderously than before.

'It's a pity,' he said, in a voice broken with

THE FIRE

pretended trouble, 'a thousand pities that you've gone and done it again. Just as I was going to let you out, too! But I can't take the risk — I daren't, really. If I should let you out, how do I know you wouldn't begin climbing trees, and shooting the pheasants, and plaguing the old woman who sells the buns and post-cards and ginger-beer? No, sweet one, no! I daren't risk it.'

Just in time I put the brake upon my onrushing anger, and forced my whirling thoughts to a stand-still. There was only one chance in a million of regaining Lethe, but if I did not keep cool there would be no chance at all. I retreated a yard from the gate and leaned against the stone wall.

For a long time there was silence. At last Canuto broke it, speaking briskly and heartily.

'By the way,' he said, 'I never thanked you for coming. It was so nice of you. But I expect you're beginning to wonder what's become of the fire-works. Don't worry. We shall start lighting 'em quite soon. I'm sorry to say, not many guests have turned up. The time's a bit awkward, you see, and the place is a little out of the way. Still, there'll be one or two interesting people I should like you to meet. For instance, the Italian is here — the most delightful creature imaginable. Then there's his friend, Signor Nicolo, a musician, who's frightfully keen on animals. I'm hoping he's brought both his monkey and his organ. Barrison's come, too —



VIRGINIE

the Brattle antiquary. He's a bit muffish, to my taste, but I'm sure you'll admire him enormously. That's all.'

My heart shrank and froze.

'But no,' he sang out cheerily. 'What the devil am I thinking of? There's another, of course. You remember me telling you about a blue-eyed Miss, with black hair? Eh? You don't? My mistake. I must have been talking about her to somebody else. No matter. The point is, she'll be here too. She plays a silver trumpet. If Nicolo has only bethought him to bring that organ they'll do a bit together — the cor anglais bit out of "Tristan," or perhaps even "The Lost Chord." The Italian sings and does conjuring tricks, which he learnt in Japan. As for Barrison, he smokes. I've heard he's tremendously clever at it. Oh, never fear! You'll enjoy yourself all right. Just one tip, though. If you trot round with the blue-eyed Miss, on no account ask her to have an ice. Ice is a sore point with her. Excuse my naming it. Ta-ta! See you soon!'

He strode away. At first his heels rang heavily on the pavement of the black hall, but a distant door banged against its post, and silence was added to darkness.

CHAPTER IV

NEITHER darkness nor silence lasted long. A swaying beam of white light suddenly wavered on the floor and wall, and Nicolo entered carrying one of the great lamps from the motor-car. He set it down upon the ground, with its back turned towards my little dungeon, and walked noisily out.

Through the wooden bars I looked into an oblong hall, smoothly floored with slabs of stone. It could not have measured much less than forty feet by thirty. A single pillar in the centre appeared to support a vaulted roof; for, although the lamp only illuminated the place as high as the spring of the arches, I felt sure that the room was ceiled in. Had it been open to the sky I should have been able to see one or two stars and to feel the caress of the living air.

Affixed to the pillar was an ugly notice-board; but I could not make out its legend beyond the fact that something or other was Strictly Prohibited and that somebody or other would be Prosecuted. Sprucely stacked against one of the walls I saw a number of planks and trestles such as are used for temporary tables. The timber



VIRGINIE

of which they were composed was so age-worn that they were not incongruous with the grey old walls and shadowy vaults; but, nevertheless, they furnished proof enough that Canuto had spoken the truth, and that I was shut up in some ruined castle dear to the excursionist's heart. This knowledge heartened me up even more than Nicolo's cheerful lamp. I saw at once that Canuto did not mean foul play. Doubtless, he was about to try and madden me by some fool's antics; but it was the height of the holiday season, and, in a few hours, the caretaker or a band of trippers would find me and set me free. And, once free, I vowed that, even with a day's start and all his cleverness, Lethe's captor should not escape until he had surrendered his prey.

Examining the hall more narrowly, I saw that one of the tea-tables had been rigged up on its blackened trestles at the far end. It was about three yards long. In front of it, in a straight line, little heaps of brushwood and heather stretched across the whole width from one wall to the other. I waited impatiently for the tomfoolery to begin.

There was no delay.

Behind the table, a door opened in the furthest corner of the hall. Canuto appeared in the aperture and paused, peering across to my cage. The impudent smile was gone from his face. He seemed grave, almost anxious.

For a moment I did not realise what it was that made him look uncanny. Then I under-

THE FIRE

stood. Where were his hands? On the day of his first visit to the bungalow, although he carried them easily and unobtrusively like a gentleman, his fine small hands had compelled my attention. Again, after his dash through the corn on the Sunday evening, it was by his fine small hands that Lethe and I had described and tried to identify him. Yet again, I had watched his hand in the ghostly beam through the letter-box, while it made mystic passes and I itched to twist it off at the wrist. But, as he stood in the stone doorway with his face to the white light and his back to the black dark, there were no hands to be seen.

At first I felt so certain his hands were gone that, in spite of all my resolves, I chilled with horror. But his handlessness was only an illusion. He advanced an inch or two more of his body towards the light and paused again. Then I guessed that his hands were clasped or tied behind him.

Out from the deep opening in the thickness of the massy wall, he came still further, until I discerned that his back-thrust hands were not clasped or tied, but that he was carrying the fore-part of a box or some other unwieldy burden.

Suddenly he emerged, with three long strides, full into the hall. Nicolo's big jowl and shaggy locks appeared in the doorway; for Nicolo was bearing the other end of Canuto's load. As Nicolo's feet cleared the passage, his master



VIRGINIE

turned to the right, in the direction of the table, so that I could see what they were carrying.

The sight turned me sick and cold.

Upon a rough hurdle of wattles, such as men use at a sheep-shearing, lay a human form covered by a meagre white sheet. I knew that it was Lethe. Huddled upon the hurdle, they set her down on the trestled bier.

My mind and body failed. I lurched heavily against the damp wall, hazily thankful for its hard solidity. For physical violence to myself I had felt prepared from the moment of regaining consciousness in the captured car; and, more than once, I had even faced the thought that Canuto meant to take my life on the old plea that dead men tell no tales. But it had not occurred to me that they would hurt one hair on the head of Lethe. At the worst, I had believed that they would only tear her heart-strings by wrenching her away from her short-lived happiness. And now Lethe was murdered, Lethe was dead!

No silken gag could have wholly stifled my cry of hatred and anguish. The sound awoke such echoes among the broken stones of the winding staircase above my head that I felt the unrest of the living things lurking high up in the unwholesome darkness. But neither Canuto nor Nicolo heard; or, if they heard, they did not take the slightest notice.

From the side of the hall where I had seen

THE FIRE

the neat stack of planks and trestles, Nicolo dragged out a blackened brazier. Entangled with it were a tripod and a huge kettle, evidently used for tea-making in the open air. The tripod and kettle Nicolo kicked aside; the brazier he shoved almost into the middle of the hall, its iron feet striking stridently as they ground heavily over the stone slabs. Into the cage of the brazier Nicolo stuffed an armful of withered heather and flung a-top of it three or four stout sticks, each one about as long and as thick as a man's arm. He held a lighted match under the lowest bars, and yellow flames leapt up gaily, high over the black brim of the brazier. For a few moments the warm, merry brightness filled the place so that I could look up into the heights of the vaultings and almost make out the stone dragons or griffins carved upon the bossy keystones. Then fragrant, purplish smoke grew dense in the upper spaces and the carven beasts were clouded over. The fire began to crackle and the ends of the stout sticks budded with curly little flames.

Meanwhile Canuto was poking about among the low heaps of heather and small twigs which I had noticed stretching right athwart the hall, just in front of the bier. I watched him stupidly, with paralysed limbs and a benumbed brain, until he raised his fine hands to his lips and emitted the blood-curdling, hideous, screech-owl cry with which he had answered Nicolo among the pine-trees. With an increase of hideousness pro-



VIRGINIE

portionate to his bigness and coarseness, Nicolo replied.

Canuto came forward and joined his henchman at the brazier. The heather had burned down, leaving a filigree of black stems outlined against a glow of red; but the ends of the sticks were well alight. The two men seized each a stick and brandished it until the fiery buds broke into full leaf and flower of flame. Then they darted one to the extreme left of the hall, the other to the extreme right, and thrust their torches into the two ends of the line of twigs and brushwood.

It was as though they had stirred up two nests of brazen vipers. Compact, snaky flames writhed and hissed up from the heather, shooting out forked tongues. At first all the snakes were brassy yellow; but, as the fire licked along the line, it awoke serpents of loathsome, stagnant green, vipers and adders of hellish red, asps of brave scarlet and amber, pythons of cruel blue.

I watched them quietly. They fascinated me by their unholy, basilisk grace, and I stood before them as helpless as the rabbit which looks into the eyes of the boa-constrictor. The two fires travelled steadily along towards their point of meeting.

When only about twelve or fifteen feet of unkindled fuel remained between them, Canuto suddenly leapt over the line and fell on his knees beside the bier. He drew part of the mean pall away; and I saw the face of Lethe, death-white, death-still.

THE FIRE

Nicolo shuffled over the slabs and picked up the great motor-lamp which had stood all the time on the floor. He held it higher and nearer, so that Canuto could see more plainly. His master drew off the pall altogether; and I saw Lethe's little hand, as white and small as a lily. She was still clad in the pretty blue dress which she had worn under her cloak when we left Brattle.

The two hordes of serpents twisted and spat ceaselessly along towards their zone of battle. Almost as if I were a chance spectator who had nothing to do with the affair, I began to wonder whether Canuto would be able to get up and rejoin Nicolo in time. I thought he would. Then I pictured, vaguely, the onslaught and grip of the two snaky hosts. Next, I fell to speculating over what would happen to the bier when the flames should begin to lap round the trestles and to snap and bite at the fallen pall.

Then, as though lightning had flashed, I came to myself. I felt as if a flaming sword had cleft me from shoulder to thigh, setting all the frozen fountains of life a-flow and a-glow. In a dazzling fulness of light, I saw that Lethe was not dead.

No. Lethe was not dead. She was sleeping in the midst of a burning fiery furnace as she had slept before in the dead heart of the cruel ice. She was not dead. But the flames were spurting nearer and nearer, and if they once plunged their red fangs in the white pall I did not see how she could escape.



VIRGINIE

A frightful thought smote me like a sledgehammer. Canuto was not a criminal after all; he was simply a maniac. There was method, preternatural method in his madness; but he was a madman all the same, and Lethe was his victim. In three or four minutes more it would be too late to save her.

Turning my back upon the dreadful sight, I rushed back to the doorway by which I had entered the tower and strove with all my might to shoulder away the great stone which Nicolo had tugged across the opening; it would not budge an inch. I tried to clamber over it, hooking my bound hands on its top edge and swarming up with my knees; I fell back bruised and beaten.

A chain clattered close to my ear as I lay for a moment on the ground regaining my breath. I turned over and saw Nicolo on the other side of the bars. He had just finished securing the gate with a bright new chain and padlock, and he was proceeding to take the rusty old lock and chain away.

I began struggling to my feet. With a love vaster than an archangel's in my heart and a hate more terrible than a fiend's, I was determined to hurl myself once for all against the gate in a last hope of smashing through. Perhaps I should be killed in the attempt. Better still, perhaps I should kill Nicolo.

As I blundered up I saw that the fires were hardly a yard apart. The pall had been caught

THE FIRE

up out of danger and placed over Lethe, from her shoulders to her feet; but the dampness of the trestles could not save them for long from the flames.

My mind was so wildly alive that it seemed to take in every detail without my seeking. And even my immense love and hate did not blind me to the splendour of the scene. The grandest drama ever played could not boast so majestic an end. The lamp had been carried to the outer door whence it looked out like a great eye upon the crooning pines. Within the grey, enormous hall the brazier still glowed red, while the leaping serpents, white and red, orange and green and violet, reared and hissed up into the smoking vault. Beside Lethe's bier, Canuto knelt in silence. This time her little hand lay on the pall like a lily fallen upon snow. Nicolo, before I could rise, had stolen back to the fire. Like some shaggy squire of old-world romance, he stood, bare-headed and grave, while Canuto, like a heart-broken knight, bent over Lethe's hand and laid upon it a kiss as if he were giving her a flower to keep, against a tryst in Paradise.

So as to gather up my whole strength for a last desperate crash at the gate, I leaned back for a moment against the wall, and closed my eyes and drew a deep breath.

Hurrying feet on the stones aroused me. Nicolo, the lamp in his hand, was already disappearing into the outer air with Canuto pressing hard on his heels. At the same instant, like



VIRGINIE

lovers rushing together in an embrace, the two fires blent in one.

I muttered the name of God. Then I ran back the whole length of the cell, thrust forward my right shoulder and plunged like a battering-ram at the gate.

It moved.

I dashed back and crashed forward once more; and the padlock slipped off the chain and rang upon the stones. Nicolo had failed to turn the key or to send the bolt right home. I banged at the gate again; the chain unwound; and the gate flew open.

In three leaps I reached the brazier wherein the fugitives had replaced their torches. I held the scarf which bound my wrists full in the fire till the knot was nearly burnt through; and when the flames burnt me I gloried savagely in the pain. With a fierce wrench I tore the rest of the knot apart; and, as soon as my hands were free, I dragged down the gag from across my lips. Against all prudence I cried aloud; and my great shout of triumph rang like a challenger's trumpet among the hollow vaults.

I was absolutely certain that Canuto and Nicolo would come rushing back to strike me down and fling me once more into my den; but I swore that, if they took me at all, they should never take me alive. One of the stout staves in the brazier, perhaps because it was greener than the rest, had barely caught fire. I plucked it out and exulted at the thought of its descent upon

THE FIRE

Canuto's well-kept locks and Nicolo's boorish pate. I did not thirst for murder; but if it came to an issue of two lives against two — Lethe's sweet life and mine against the soiled lives of a maniac and a hireling scoundrel — I would not pause long to decide which two lives were to be preserved.

A second later I had leapt through the fire and was standing, scarcely singed, at Lethe's side. With thankfulness to God, I saw that she was not dead, but sleeping. Indeed, her colour had begun to return and her slumber seemed almost normal. I bent down to lift her frail body with my left arm so that I could leap back with her across the fire; but, at the touch of my hand, she awoke, gave a little cry, and threw both her arms round my neck like a frightened child in the dark.

I raised her up. As she clung to my neck she was hardly heavier on my arm than a lamb in May. But to spring through the flames, holding her so and still clutching the bludgeon in my right hand, was not easy, and I backed away, searching for the weakest place in the hedge of fire. At last I found it, and made ready for the leap. But, in the self-same second, the flames ceased. There was no gradual dying down. They went out abruptly, like gas-lights suddenly cut off from the main. A copious smoke or steam rose up as from wet heather, and the staves still sputtered and flamed in the brazier; but that was all.



VIRGINIE

I set my teeth. Maniac or criminal, Canuto had evidently got more cards to play. My only hope was to take an instantaneous offensive and to batter down his power by an onslaught of old English courage and by the brute energy of youth. I decided to make a dash for the open air. Among the trees, with darkness in my favour, there was still a chance. Besides, it flashed upon me that I was safe in bursting through the door by which they themselves had gone. For some infernal reason Lethe was precious to Canuto, and he would not shoot so long as I held her in my arms. She should shield me for a moment that I might shield her for ever.

I rushed for the door and broke out into the star-lit night. The foe held his hand. More fully awakened by the jolting and by the cold, Lethe clung to me closer than ever till I could feel her soft young cheek pressed against mine.

Before us stretched a cobbled court. It was bounded by a high wall in which was pierced a broad gateway. The gate was wide open. I dashed through and found myself in the clearing, thirty paces from the sandy lane. At the beginning of the lane, with its lamps in their places and ready for a start, stood the car. It was empty. I wavered only a moment. On the one hand the car might be a trap. On the other hand, the last thing Canuto would expect me to do would be to rush back into his power. Boldness was the only policy. If I could reach the car before Canuto, I might get away. If not . . .

THE FIRE

the bludgeon was in my hand and Lethe was against my heart.

I bounded across the dim clearing. There was none to say me nay. I gained the car. Lethe's cloak and my leather coat still lay upon the seat. Almost flinging her in, I leapt up by Lethe's side, and we began to plough through the soft sand.

At every moment I expected the crack of a revolver from among the pines; but no shot was fired. Then I felt certain that they would way-lay us at the gate, where Nicolo's little lantern had pointed the way to the castle; but we bumped out of the lane into the damp dark road without sight or sound of a pursuer. My scorched hands caused me agony; but I gripped the wheel and kept the road and hardly drew breath till we cleared the trees and began thumping up the hill.

CHAPTER V

ON the ridge of the hill I halted.

'What have we stopped for?' panted Lethe, in a fright. By this time she was as wide awake as I was.

'Nothing,' I answered. 'Don't be afraid. You are safe. They can't catch us.'

I had pulled up in order to possess myself of the giant 'At Home' card which still lay half on the road half on the grass. But, as I moved to leap down, Lethe clung to my arm.

'Where are you going?' she demanded desperately. 'You shan't go!'

'Then you must go instead,' I said, smiling to reassure her. 'That big card — that white thing lying on the ground. I want it in the car.'

She jumped out eagerly. But the drug had not yet deserted her veins; she reeled, and if I had not sprung after her, she would have fallen.

'I'm not a bit of good, ever. Am I?' she asked with a rueful little face as I swung her back upon the seat and stuffed the card under it.

I climbed to her side and drew her closely to me. But there was little time for fond speeches.

THE FIRE

'You are every bit as good as gold, always,' I said. 'So you're going to do just as you're told. Make haste with your cloak. Never mind the veil. Shut your eyes. Put your arm round me and hold fast.'

She obeyed, and we started Brattlewards down the hill. Although I had told Lethe that we were safe, I still found it impossible to believe that Canuto had indeed allowed us to escape. I still felt sure that my old notion of him was true, and that he was a human cat, only suffering his victims to fly so that he might fling himself again upon them with sharper claws and hungrier maw. I expected that he had a car or a pair of horses in reserve, and that he was already speeding along some short cut in order to burst upon us with new horrors.

I let the car go. We flashed through the dark like a shooting star. We approached the great wood through which, gagged and dazed, I had bumped with Canuto only an hour before. So fast we flew that though, at one moment, we seemed to be nearing a mere straggle of gorse, at the next moment a tropical forest seemed to roof in our roaring and blazing track. Out of the wood we hurtled, past broad fields where kine and horses leapt up from their sleep all a-fright and stampeded, glimmering whitely. Quite soon we reached the spot where I had regained consciousness with Lethe cuddled against my breast. But the way was clear. If



VIRGINIE

the enemy had indeed followed us, we had outstripped him.

We had left the by-roads and were racing along a broad highway. With any other human being than Canuto in the case I would have been at the end of my fears. But I knew that his arm was long and his craft deep; and that I must go very far afield to outrange him. My heart ached for my terrified, half-fainting little Lethe, and the burns on my hands were becoming unendurable; but we dashed on at the utmost speed of the car.

At last we came to a place where five ways met. The broad road on which we had been travelling joined a still broader road flanked by telegraph-poles bearing a thick skein of wires. We had reached some highway of the first importance. I stopped, and stood up to read the many armed guide-post on the grassy islet round which the roads flowed. The light had increased and I made out that we were on the main route from Broadhaven to London, and also, that London was seventy-one miles away. One arm of the guide-post which pointed to a narrower but well-kept road on our right was lettered 'Westhampton 9 Miles, Brattle 15 Miles.'

'Are we lost?' asked Lethe, faintly.

'No,' I said, 'we're not lost; but we don't mean to be found. There's time to tie your veil. After this, we needn't rush on so fast. And I promise that in another hour you shall rest and have your breakfast.'



THE FIRE

‘I’m not a bit tired, and I’m not a bit hungry,’ she said, bravely. But I saw that the poor child’s nerves were on the point of giving way.

‘She mustn’t tell falsehoods,’ I said, helping her with the veil. ‘She is tired to death; and, if she isn’t ravenously hungry, she ought to be. Lean back and rest. We will go gently.’

I struggled into my leather coat; for my long breasting of the night air had chilled me to the bone. Once more we got under way. The surface of the road was so good that I was able to keep up a fair speed without causing suffering to Lethe.

My intention, on reading the finger-post, was to make for London. I reckoned that the journey, allowing two spells of rest for Lethe and one for the needs of the car, would require six hours, and that I would still be in time to spend the morning in an immediately practical conference with a reverend mother-abbess, or a French consul, or a high dignitary of police. But as we scudded on, the thought of London became more and more forbidding. For the present Canuto was beaten. Lethe, my wonderful Lethe, whom I had so wholly lost that I had despaired of ever seeing her again, was actually nestling once more beside me; and I felt able and eager to defend her against a legion of Canutos, so long as mother-abbesses and consuls and policemen were not allowed to interfere. Besides, the prime object of my journey had been to place Lethe in other hands; but, after the terrors of this summer night,



VIRGINIE

I could no longer bear the thought of her leaving my side. She was mine.

Again, was there not danger in keeping to the London road? How did I know that Canuto had not caught a mail-train from the town, whichever it might be, whence the trippers came out to the ruined tower? For all I knew he was, at that very moment, preparing to throw himself theatrically across my path, possibly within twenty miles of London Bridge.

Ought I to turn right round and go to Brattle? Without hesitation, I answered, No! A return to Brattle was one of the probable movements on my part which Canuto was certain to anticipate; and, until Lethe was rested and my burns were healed, it did not please me to renew the fray.

We came to a modest finger-post on our left. It pointed along a leafy road which wound away to the north-east. Instantly I made my decision. Without troubling about a specific destination, I would simply hold on a north-easterly course until half-a-dozen irrational divergences should throw all possible pursuers off the track.

We warped round to the left. At the end of a mile there was again a choice of roads, but I steered boldly towards the north-east. Five minutes later we trundled through an untidy village, waking all the dogs and barn-yard cocks, and even bringing to his window some angry body who hurled after us words which we were too far off to distinguish. Again there was a choice of roads, and again I took the north-east

THE FIRE

passage. Once my heart stood still at the sight of two black figures crouching at the side of the road; but they were only drowsing tramps, who cursed us cheerfully as we startled them from sleep. At last we rattled through a tiny town, with one long cobbled street curving down steeply to a wide, shallow, clear river, running swiftly and loudly over millions of little white stones. As we descended, the river was on our left, at the bottom of a green bank, and in the waxing light we could hear the noise of a mill and see a long, low, many-arched, ancient bridge striding sturdily across the foam-flecked water. Old houses, black-timbered and white-plastered, clustered together at the bridge end, and a wide, short, grey church faced them, with a square of tree-girt grass between. In all England I had never seen a sweeter scene than this sleeping town; and Lethe sat up with a start of delight.

Our north-easterly course took us over the bridge and up through orchards to a rolling, well-tilled upland. Half a mile further on, the tillage ceased and we skirted a sandy common where hundreds of rabbits bobbed away at our approach. I descried a pleasant hollow fringed with brambles and young beeches; and there we came to a stand, beside a clear pool.

When I helped Lethe to the ground, I saw that her paleness was gone. She set to work at once upon the breakfast, while I was busy with the car. But as soon as she opened the hamper, she cried out.



VIRGINIE

I ran to her. Half the provisions we had brought had been taken away; but in their place lay a glorious bunch of flowers.

We looked at them in bewilderment. Underneath reposed the unstolen half of our breakfast, in packages which had not been disturbed. Suddenly Lethe started forward in a panic and cried: 'The trumpet? The silver trumpet? Where is the silver trumpet?'

I rummaged the car in vain. For the silver trumpet was gone.

CHAPTER VI

'THEN it wasn't a dream?' asked Lethe, her face clouding over with fear and trouble.

'A dream?' I echoed, amazed. The knowledge that she had lived through the worst of her ordeal believing it to be no more than a nightmare filled me with thankfulness. But I could not hope to restore her illusion; so I repeated, 'a dream? You didn't think it was only a dream? Why, what did you make of it on the top of the hill, before you got out for that big card, when I said that they couldn't catch us and that you were safe? Did you think I had been dreaming too?'

'Yes,' she said, simply. 'I thought we'd both been dreaming the same bad dream together. But we couldn't, could we? I'm always stupid.'

'It's over now, and we're clean out of it, and we'll never fall into a trap again,' I said. 'But, while it lasted, it was no dream. It was a foul reality. Tell me. How much do you remember?'

'I remember you stopped at the cross-roads because some gipsies had left a cart right across the way,' she answered. 'You shouted at them.'

VIRGINIE

Then I smelt a pleasant scent and I fell asleep. And, while I was asleep, I had a terrible dream. Yes, yes,' she wailed, breaking down and crying. 'It was a dream. It must have been. It can't be true. You are cruel to me!'

'Tell me all about it,' I said, humouring her. 'What was it that you dreamt?'

'I dreamt the gipsies caught us. I dreamt that I partly woke up in the gipsies' cave with bright fires, like camp-fires, dancing all round me. I deamt I couldn't see the roof of the cave because of the smoke. Then I dreamt that suddenly I woke up altogether and ——'

'Go on,' I coaxed, drawing her to me. 'You dreamt ——?'

'I dreamt that I woke up and saw you bending over me; and that I . . . I threw my arms round your neck, and you rushed with me out of the cave and put me back into the car. And when I woke up — I mean, when I really and truly woke up near the top of the hill — and you said we were safe, I thought . . .'

She paused, perplexed. I tried to help her.

'You thought the cave was only a nightmare? You thought we had never been out of the car? You thought we were still running away from the gipsies — the gipsies near Brattle?'

She shook her head and her tears flowed again.

'I don't know what I thought,' she sobbed. 'But it was dreadful.'

While I stroked her hand and tried to comfort her, I wondered what I ought to do. She did

THE FIRE

not so much as suspect that Canuto had come within a league of her since his furtive crawl through the wheat on the Sunday afternoon. She believed that we had merely escaped from a brace of sordid thieves, the degenerate and unpicturesque successors of the Dick Turpins and the Claude Duvals of the bad old times. I concluded that it would be best to deceive her a little until she had rested and eaten.

'Yes, it was dreadful,' I said cheerfully. 'But it might have been worse. We'll try and get back the trumpet. If we fail, you shall have a new one exactly like it.'

'But it was . . . his,' she retorted. 'What will he say? What will you do?'

'I won't do anything till we've had our breakfast,' I said, dropping her hand and going briskly to the open hamper. 'Fortunately they've left us enough to keep alive on. What about these flowers? If I were you, I shouldn't keep them.'

'Not keep them!' she cried. 'They are lovely.'

'No doubt,' I answered. 'But the people who've been handling them weren't lovely, were they? And how can we be sure that they're not drugged or poisoned?'

She lifted them tenderly out of my hand and looked at them with longing eyes. Then she crushed them ruthlessly together and flung them far into the bushes.

'They're gone,' she said demurely.

'You are a good girl,' I said, meeting her



VIRGINIE

comical air of daughterliness with a smile of paternal approval. And, before she had time to ask at what stage of the mysterious night the gipsies had stolen half a breakfast and a whole trumpet, I began to untie strings and to rattle knives and plates.

'That's all wrong,' she cried. 'We don't use those little plates till the end. No, nor the little knives either.'

I kept up a fire of objections and questions and suggestions, and made half-a-dozen ludicrous mistakes so as to distract her mind. But she would not be merry.

'Tell me,' she pleaded, after we had made some kind of a toilet at the pool-side, 'how much of it was a dream? How did you get past the horse and cart? How long was I asleep?'

'It is a long, long story, little one,' I said, maintaining the elderly tone which always won her obedience. 'And I am hungry enough to bolt all these nice things and to eat you up as well. Let me light the stove. The water can boil for the coffee while we are eating our sandwiches and drinking our wine. After breakfast, you shall ask as many thousands of questions as you like.'

She sighed, but sat down dutifully on the grass beside the cloth. She did not notice that the bottle from which I poured the dark Musigny into her glass had already been opened by 'the gipsies' and exactly half its contents taken away. Although she drank the wine eagerly, she ate

THE FIRE

little; and, very soon, I noticed that her gaze was fixed on my plate.

'What is the matter with your hands?' she demanded, point-blank. 'You hold your knife and fork as if you have been hurt.'

'It's nothing,' I said, trying to ply the tools in a normal way.

'It is, it is,' she retorted. 'You're hurt. I'm going to look.' And, rising to her knees, she stretched out both her hands across the narrow cloth and seized both of mine.

'They are burns — dreadful burns,' she said. 'And you never told me!'

By the side of the salad stood a squat phial of olive oil. She seized it and drew the stopper. Next, from her little blue bag or corded pocket which lay on the ground beside her, she took two pretty new handkerchiefs. I recognised them as a pair which had pleased her fancy when she ransacked the wares from Thycke & Thynne's. She poured the oil all over them and laid them deftly upon my smarting wounds. Then, with contemptuous brusqueness, she swept and shoved our plates and glasses and knives and forks upon the grass and took up the cloth to tear it across the middle. Her childish strength could not rend it; so she gashed it here and there with the prongs of a fork and the end of a knife until holes were made into which she could thrust her hands so as to drag it in twain. With the ragged halves she swaddled my hands until they looked like the fore-paws of a Polar bear. Finally, she



VIRGINIE

picked up my knife and fork and set to work cutting my share of the chicken into little bits, as one cuts up his dinner for a small child. All my protests were drowned in a torrent of scolding for having neglected the burns so long.

The kettle startled her by a brisk hissing, and she sprang up to make the coffee. Too hungry to wait, I went on with my eating and drinking, jabbing at the bits of bird with a fork clutched clumsily in my right paw, and holding the glass precariously to my lips with both paws at once, like a squirrel munching at a nut.

'It was true, then?' Lethe began excitedly, as she returned with two jugs. 'It was true? They did really catch us, after all? And you did really snatch me away from the fire?'

'You've been an angel,' I said. 'Try and be perfect a little longer. Finish what's in your glass and on your plate. Then you shall pour out the coffee and I'll tell you all about it.'

'How can I?' she retorted almost scornfully, 'how can I go on eating and drinking until I know? I've eaten enough already. Tell me this minute.'

It was plain that she had begun to suspect that there was something grave and terrible to tell. I hastened to drive a bargain.

'We'll exchange promises,' I said. 'You promise me that you'll eat the chicken that's on your plate and one sandwich; and I'll promise you that I'll begin talking the minute you've finished eating.'

THE FIRE

'I can't,' she pleaded. 'You're unkind.' Then, in her impulsive way, she held up on her fork a bit of chicken's breast about an inch square and asked eagerly: 'Won't it do if I finish this piece?'

'That piece and one sandwich.'

'No, no, I can't. This piece. Please!'

'That piece and half a sandwich. But don't gobble it up at that rate,' I said. 'It's bad manners, and you'll have indigestion.'

She sighed and worked meekly through her portion.

'Now!' she cried.

Leaving everything on the grass, I made her sit beside me in the deep round-backed seat at the back of the car while I told the tale from beginning to end. As I described the swift and unlooked-for stroke by which I had been hoisted out of the car at the top of the hill and torn away from her side she shivered. But it must have been that she still thought our assailants were mere gipsies; for, when I told her that it was Canuto who had bent over me as they laid me on the grass, she screamed out her surprise and terror.

'He?' she moaned. 'He? It was he?' She trembled violently all over and shrank against me as if he were hot on our track.

'He's miles and miles away,' I said. 'And we've taken such a round-about course that he couldn't find us if he tried. If she won't promise not to be frightened, I won't tell her any more.'

VIRGINIE

'I promise, I promise,' she cried, hungrily. 'I'm not frightened. Tell me every word.'

I went on up to the point of Canuto's elaborate mockery of a dialogue in the dark. And, lest she should fear some worse thing, I told her of my new-formed belief that Canuto was not a criminal, but a maniac.

She shuddered.

'A madman,' she repeated, more to herself than to me. 'A madman!' Then, breaking out into a wail of most bitter reproach and anguish, she went on, 'but why . . . *me?* What have I done to hurt him? Why *me?*' And she sobbed as if her gentle heart were forever broken.

'Madmen don't have reasons,' I said, taking her cold little hand between my warm great paws, as if she had been Una and I the lion. 'If they acted on reasons, they wouldn't be mad.' And I tried, tactlessly, to console her by describing the insensate loves and hates of those mono-maniacs who seem saner than natural men in many details of daily conduct, although they are hopelessly mad in regard to life as a whole. She only shuddered more pitiably at the cruel revelation that Fate had chosen her out to be an innocent victim struggling in such loathly toils.

At the sight of her agony, I half decided to recur to my original plan and to place her in safe hands in London, so that I might be able to scour England and France in search of the maniac whose crazy tortures would otherwise drive my



THE FIRE

Lethe into a madness worse than his own. As she hid her weeping face in my shoulder she was so frail and little and tender that the thought of Canuto's hell-brewed potions and devilish engines revived murderous hatred in my heart. I knew that not the coarsest-grained, hugest navvy, even if he were lustier than a bull of Bashan, could endure for long such druggings and poisonings, such freezings and scorplings, such excursions and alarums, as had befallen my elfin, flower-sweet Lethe within the space of twelve summer nights and days. Surely the time had come to carry the war into the enemy's camp.

She sat up suddenly and cut my thinking short.

'Go on,' she commanded sturdily, though the tears still welled from her eyes. 'I am waiting. Don't leave out anything. If you do . . . I shall know.'

It was best to tell her, and I did. She heard me with parted lips, with a heaving breast, with eyes that opened wider and wider. When I had finished, she gazed with a kind of wonder deep down into my eyes. At last, almost in a whisper, she asked:

'What would you have done if . . . if they had taken me away?'

'I should have followed you,' I answered, 'to the end of the world, until the day of judgment.'

'But what if the fire had caught us? What if we had been burned to death?'

'Life is better than death,' I said, trying in



VIRGINIE

vain to smile her strange solemnity away. 'But if I had died . . . it would have been sweet to die with You.'

We sat together without speaking. Our untasted coffee grew cold on the grass. Then the hard labour of the night began to tell upon me, and an irresistible drowsiness pressed on my eyelids like lead. The day had dawned and the East was like a bower of crimson roses clinging and climbing among lattices of gold. Peace was within me and without. There grew in my mind a gracious certainty that Heaven was watching over us, and, after a last weak struggle, I surrendered myself to dreamless sleep. For it was the truth, the sweet truth and not a dream, that as I gave up the fight a soft arm stole round my neck and drew down my weary head to pillow it against a girlish breast.

CHAPTER VII

ACCORDING to the dainty but irresponsible watch which Lethe wore buckled to her left wrist, I slept for three hours. She awoke me with a shaking and with the words,

‘Somebody’s coming.’

I opened my eyes wide. Lethe was standing beside the car, on the turf. I looked up the almost disused road and saw a youth descending towards us. He was driving a foal in the direction of the many-gabled little town with the long bridge. As he drew near, I jumped down to meet him. My plans for the day took shape rapidly.

‘Good morning,’ I said.

At first he eyed me suspiciously, as if I had been an unmistakable horse-thief. But he was reassured by the sight of Lethe and of the neat array of crockery and cutlery which she had washed and polished during my long sleep. The glass and silver flashed in the strong sunshine.

‘Morning,’ he replied, at last.

‘What is the name of the town we’ve come through—the town down there on the river?’ I asked.



VIRGINIE

He stared me up and down with a true rustic's contempt for my ignorance of the biggest fact in his little world. If I had declared that I had never heard of Paris or Berlin he would have held me in less disdain.

'It be called Great Whitford,' he confessed, grudgingly. 'I be going there now.'

'Is there a railway station?'

He grunted out derision. 'I never 'eard tell of no railway station,' he said, relishing his own wit. But, after a pause, he added, 'there be a station at Little Whitford.'

Meanwhile, Lethe was patting the meagre flanks of the foal, a quaint little animal with a winsome muzzle and ridiculous legs.

'Is there an inn at Great Whitford?' I went on.

'An inn?' he repeated ironically. 'I've 'eard tell there be one or two. There be "The Dook o' Dorset." An' "The 'Anging Gate." An' "The Golden Lion." An' "The Prince o' Wales." An' "The Bridge 'Otel." An' "The Three Jolly ——"'

I cut him short before he could say what was the calling or craft or mystery or recreation of the Three Jolly Ones of Whitford.

'I mean,' I said, 'Is there a decent hotel? A place where they know anything about a motor-car?'

'Meanin' "The Whitford Arms,"' he answered, with the surliness of a Radical towards a bloated Capitalist.



THE FIRE

'Could you do with five shillings?'

He turned Tory in a twinkling, and saluted in the best old 'God-bless-the-Squire' manner.

'Can I depend on you to hand in this telegram as soon as the post-office opens?' I asked, giving him the despatch to Mrs. Hipkins, ready stamped. 'And can you ask them at "The Whitford Arms" to send somebody up here who can drive this car down to the hotel? I've hurt my hand.'

He saluted again briskly and pocketed the telegram and the money with sunny thoughts of 'The Dook o' Dorset' or 'The 'Anging Gate' kindling in his eyes. Then he turned to the foal which, after scorning a sandwich of pâté-de-foie-gras, was munching lumps of sugar out of Lethe's hand, and hurried away.

Although she had not understood a word of our English dialogue, Lethe shewed no curiosity respecting it. She stood and gazed regretfully after the foal.

'Wasn't it sweet?' she asked with a sigh.

I drew her arm through mine and walked with her seven or eight times round the glittering pool, unfolding plans. Briefly, my decision was to leave the car at Great Whitford and to return openly to Brattle by train. Once at Brattle, we would prepare for a last struggle with Canuto on our own ground. If I could run against him on equal terms, so much the worse for him and so much the better for me. But I resolved not to be superfine. At the first sign of his return



VIRGINIE

to the neighbourhood, I would telephone for the police to come and secure a dangerous lunatic, of whose perilous madness the aluminium coffin and his books and letters would be sufficient proof.

She shrank from Brattle, pleading against it until I began to waver. Then, with one of the sudden rallies of courage which had been so characteristic of her in every one of her ordeals, she completely altered her tone and stamped her foot in defiance.

'No,' she cried, 'I'm a coward to want to run away! You are right. We'll go back. Wherever we go he will follow, he will find us. How can we be happy when we know he's hunting us down? No. We'll face him and get it over, once for all. Besides, how can I rest till I know this awful secret? We will go back to Brattle.'

Her stout-heartedness and fine-mindedness thrilled me with pride. Although I could not hope that she was looking as far as I was into the future, a sound instinct had led her to see that the solving of the mystery was the paramount need. In my own mind it was becoming plainer and plainer that I must marry Lethe at the earliest possible moment. I can honestly declare that no selfish motive impelled me to such a course. Looking at the matter simply from a selfish point of view, I would have preferred immeasurably to prolong my wooing and to leave marriage unmentioned until the day when this



THE FIRE

rare maid, obeying her heart alone, should plight herself to me freely as a loving bride. Indeed, there was something sacrilegious in the notion of rushing on a marriage merely that I might acquire a legal status as her protector against Canuto. But the harsh practical facts had to be faced; and it was ridiculous to expect that the fine bloom of an idyllic courtship could be preserved amid the coming rough-and-tumble. Lethe must become my legal wife first, and, if Fate were kind, my sweet, consenting bride afterwards.

So perfect was our sympathy as we walked round and round the pool that, if it had not been for one thing, I could have urged the marriage there and then. But a frightful possibility kept me silent. What if Canuto, or one of Canuto's confederates or victims, had forestalled me? What if Lethe had a husband already? If husband she had, I knew without the faintest shadow of doubt that he was a husband in name only. I was as sure on that point as I was sure that the sun was burning in heaven. One glance at her was more than enough to prove that, however base their reasons, the fiends who were tormenting her had brought Lethe to me purer than the ice on a virgin peak. But some merely legal marriage had possibly taken place; and I had to pause before I risked adding to the tangle and bringing upon her double shame and wrong. Besides, I could not contract a valid marriage with Lethe so long as she and I were

and where I could find them? Not that
their antagonism. If, as I suspected
had been abducted from a great house
could not forbid the marriage when the
of her fortnight under my roof. (On
contrary, their first anxiety would be
should simply restore to them their d
and then retire from an affair which had
thrust upon me.

‘Why are you so quiet?’ Lethe asked.

‘I’m thinking.’

‘Why don’t you think aloud?’

I pressed her arm. She felt the hint ;
silent. For a few moments I was inclined
take her fully into my confidence, and
turned over in my head the exact words
Had I uttered them, they would have been
much like these:

‘I think I know the secret. He is not a
His madness is a pretence. He has kidnapped
you. He has taken you from friends who
rich and proud. By some devil’s trick
robbed you of your memory. He has plotted
with me because he knew that you would
. . . and that I should fall in love with

THE FIRE

France. And he knows that he can name his own price. Further, when your friends learn all, they will command you to marry me whether you can love me or not; and you are such a dutiful child that it's no use assuming you will disobey. Therefore, if you're obliged to marry me some day —'

But there the deceitful clearness of my thinking ended abruptly and all the rest was a fog wherein a few misleading gleams of sickly light only half revealed a throng of blurred and monstrous forms which came and went absurdly. My fine theory left far too much unexplained. If Lethe were indeed a stolen treasure, worth thousands to her friends and every penny I had in the world to me, why had Canuto allowed me to recapture her so easily in the ruined tower? Holding her safe on some neutral ground he would have been able to dictate terms both to the château in France and to the bungalow in Brattle. And, as for marriage, I felt that to broach it to Lethe on such sordid lines would be a barren brutality.

I became duly humble. I saw that instead of making a perspicacious flight into the thick of the next campaign, my wits had only been travelling round a vicious circle. All that my precious deliberations had amounted to was this: That I must marry Lethe in order that I might have the right to extort Canuto's secret; and, at the same time, that I must extort Canuto's secret in order that I might have the right to marry Lethel

comes?’

I started, even more at her wisdom than pluck.

‘I think he’s sure to come,’ she added if we’ve gone to London. If he finds us shut up, he may go away for weeks at a time tracking us. That would be dreadful.’

‘Do you really mean,’ I said, stopping and looking at her in amazement, ‘that you shrink from having him anywhere near us?’

‘I hate him!’ she cried with a sudden burst of anger. ‘He is a fiend. Shrink from him? Of course I do! But I shrink far more from living another day without finding out that I hate him, I say. But I must get it over. I can’t bear it.’

The angry fires in her eyes were quenched by a gush of tears.

‘Don’t cry,’ I said. ‘Such a brave little girl mustn’t cry.’

‘I’m not crying,’ she answered, drying her cheeks. ‘And I’m not brave either. I’m most dreadfully afraid if I weren’t gone with you.’

THE FIRE

And, tripping off to the plates and glasses which were sweetening in the wind, she swathed them in palls of long grass and buried them in the hamper.

Much sooner than I expected, an unmistakable motorist came striding up from 'The Whitford Arms.' It was the landlord's son, a keen-faced, taciturn man of about thirty. When, instead of holding my tongue, I foolishly said that I had hurt my hands on the way from Brattle to London, he smiled only the ghost of a smile; and, when I made bad worse by telling a tale of wrong turnings to account for my being with Lethe, in the early morning, in a grass-grown lane at least ten miles out of our proper track, I could see that he drew a conclusion which it was useless either to correct or to resent. All I cared about was that he should land us swiftly and safely at his hotel; and this he accomplished in less than ten minutes.

As the car was none the better for its night's knocking about, I arranged for it to be driven to London for overhauling at the makers' the same day.

Lethe, after a great splashing and brushing amid the comparative luxury of the hotel's best bedroom, lay down to snatch half an hour's rest while the landlord's son and I went to rouse Great Whitford's one doctor out of bed in order that my burns might be dressed.

'How did it happen?' asked the doctor of the landlord's son, sleepily.



VIRGINIE

'How did it happen?' said the landlord's son to me, listlessly.

'I burnt them,' I said to the landlord's son.

'He burnt them,' repeated the landlord's son to the doctor, who had ceased to be interested. Great Whitford was a town of few words.

By ten o'clock we were ready to start in the hotel's Late Georgian omnibus for Little Whitford station. The landlord's wife, although she hardly concealed her disapproval of Lethe, persisted in undercharging us; possibly counting on recouping herself out of her witness-fees and travelling expenses in connection with an inevitable and early divorce case. At noon we reached Warmdale Junction and changed carriages for the third time in a journey of less than thirty miles. The short train clanked into the terminus of the branch line to Brattle a few minutes after one.

CHAPTER VIII

HAD I been still keen on hiding Lethe from their busy eyes, no doubt I should have met the whole of my Brattle acquaintance as we drove from the station to the bungalow. But, since I had taken my new resolve to fight in the open, it was quite in the nature of things that we should rumble along the shadeless length of Church Street without meeting a soul who knew me. Our four-wheeler was closed simply because it would not open; but even if Lethe and I had been sitting bolt upright in an open carriage, like royal personages on their way to lay a stone, there would have been no gaping populace to give us a thought. The very cabman — an elderly person, who seemed to be lost in a beautiful dream of beer — did not find us extraordinary.

The bungalow had not been disturbed. Upon our entering the hall, and banging the front door behind us, I had two or three seconds of suspense over a long, ugly-looking envelope which was sprawling face downwards at the bottom of the wire letter-box; but it turned out to be no more than an almost lyrical appeal from some advertis-



VIRGINIE

ing wine merchants on behalf of their 'Startling Line in Very Pretty Moselle Suitable for the Hot Weather at an Unprecedented Reduction in Price.' There were no other letters, and no signs of life, save the buzzing flies within, and the shadows of the birds on the blinds as they hurled their eager bodies athwart the sunshine without.

We had already pecked up a sufficient luncheon in the train, so there was nothing to hinder Lethe from seeking more sleep. But she would not depart to her room, save on the solemn understanding that she could lie down in her clothes, and that I would rouse her on the lightest suspicion of a call from Canuto.

I sat down in the hall, and tried to read a book — a new novel which I had bought at the Little Whitford bookstall because its clever binding had pleased Lethe. To my disgust I found that the thing was simply one more melodrama, stuffed full of detectives, and robberies, and breathless escapes from fire and flood, and hidden wills, and foundlings, and all the rest of the hack novelist's stock-in-trade.

As the book slipped to the ground, the irony of the situation came home to me. Who was I to gibe at melodrama, when for twelve days I had been playing the conventional young hero's part in a piece which would have put the most lurid of transpontine playwrights to shame? British Pluck, Youthful Love, Beauty and Virtue in Distress, Powders, Poisons, Potions, Villains (plain and coloured), Forged Letters — we had



THE FIRE

had them, each and every one, not forgetting the Great Crypt Scene with Unique Pyrotechnical Effects. My nerves were at high tension, and probably I was super-sensitive, but I smarted at the vulgar setting which Canuto was giving to the first and last love-idyll of my life. It was as though some mad stage-manager should insist on placing a representation of the sands at Margate as a background to the second act of 'Tristan and Isolde,' with nigger-minstrels to eke out the love-duet. With a hot increase of angry loathing, I resolved to treat the insolent scoundrel as contemptuously as he had treated me.

I thrust the fellow out of my mind, and gave myself up to delicious thoughts of my Lethe. The softness of her arm around my neck while the great dawn-flowers unfolded their rosy petals in the sky had been cheaply bought, even at the bitter price of my midnight ordeal, with all its crowding rage, and terror, and despair, its giant labours, its rushing flights, its smarting wounds. It was her most sweet pity at the sight of my fatigue, and her wondering gratitude at the little I had done for her, which had moved her to cherish me against her true heart when she believed I was too deeply sunk in sleep to know what she was doing. But I could not doubt that, out of such pity and gratitude, love would spring at last.

The telephone bell rang out, not an arm's length from my ear. Prepared for what actually happened, I placed the receiver to my ear, and

VIRGINIE

before I could call out 'Who's there?' Canuto's voice began babbling chummily.

'Is that you, Barrison?' chirruped the voice. 'Thought I'd just ring you up to see if you've got home all right. Love to Lethe. By the way —'

Without listening to another word, and without speaking a single syllable in reply, I simply put the receiver back on the hooks and cut off the connection. If Canuto wished to be certain whether I was in London or in Brattle he would have to come in person and find out.

I sat down again, less nettled by his impudence than pleased at the prospect of an early renewal of the battle. The only thing I had dreaded was to have the affair hanging over our heads for weeks or months. I revolved a dozen plans for taking the offensive the moment the enemy should shew his head.

Perhaps half-an-hour passed before the door shook under a triple knock from the heavy brass knocker. I jumped up, and almost at the same instant Lethe, in pale-blue satin slippers and with disordered hair, tore open her bedroom door.

'It's he!' she hissed across the hall.

'Go back,' I hissed in reply.

Instead, she ran right out into the hall.

'Very well,' I said. 'If you prefer it . . . the study.' And I hurried her by the shoulder into my study, leaving the door ajar so that she could see through the crack.

There was a jangling peal of the old-fashioned

THE FIRE

bell. I made sure of the revolver which I had sworn to carry till Canuto was ended or mended. Then I glanced through the window. A policeman was standing at the gate, while somebody else was scraping his boots impatiently on the stone step.

Canuto's boldness hit me like a thunderbolt. For a moment the brilliance of his strategy half blinded me. I felt sure that he was about to deliver his master-stroke, and to have me arrested for his own crime—the abduction of Lethe. The melodramatic novel, still lying where I had dropped it, caught my eye, and even the imminence of danger could not restrain me from one grim smile. But suddenly I lost sight of Canuto's dash and daring, and saw only his hellish treachery. It flashed upon me that he had denounced me to the police upon the foulest of charges, and that I should have only Lethe's word and my own to set against a mass of damning evidence. Canuto's tale that I had seen his pretty daughter, or ward, and snatched her away, would be simple and credible; but my counter-tale of wax figures, and lost memories, and virtuous days could only serve me to the extent of landing me in a mad-house instead of in a gaol.

Three feet of air and two inches of wood separated me from the foe. I recovered my nerve, and decided on striking blow for blow. If Canuto gave me in charge, I would give him in charge also. After all, I was an Englishman of



VIRGINIE

open and clean antecedents, and therefore more entitled to be believed than a nameless alien. So I resolved to obey the knock, and before Canuto could utter a sound, to demand his arrest as a rogue, and vagabond, and thief.

I turned the handle, and flung wide the door. But the man who stood, black and hot, on the step, was not Canuto. It was the inspector of police, and the constable was still at the gate.

I recoiled a step, cursing myself for my folly. I felt certain that Canuto had out-manœuvred me once more, and that I should not see him till he appeared as a witness at my trial. And, meanwhile, he would get Lethe back into his power.

‘I’m afraid I’ve startled you, sir,’ said the inspector. I took it that he was a decent fellow, anxious to get through a nasty job with as little harshness as possible. Or perhaps he was prepared to temper the majesty of the law, and to arrest me quietly and gently, in expectation of half-a-sovereign.

‘I was afraid no one was at home,’ he went on, with suspicious politeness.

‘Say what you want,’ I retorted, ‘and say it sharp.’ I had swiftly formed the plan of insisting that Lethe should be taken to the police-station with me, to be under the watch and ward of the law, until I could prove my counter-charges against Canuto up to the hilt.

The inspector looked surprised, and a shade aggrieved. I understood afterwards that to be inspector of police in Brattle is to be a very

THE FIRE

worshipful and puissant personage indeed; and my rough tone made the constable at the gate jump, as if he expected to see Jove's bolts hurtling from the blue upon the bungalow in punishment of my impiety.

'I'm simply doing my dooty,' declared the inspector, with dignity.

'Then why the devil don't you do it?' I snapped.

He fumbled in his pocket, and fished up a blue paper. Although it was the supreme moment, I was conscious of a childish curiosity to see what the king's warrant was really like. I moved forward to receive the fatal touch on my shoulder. But the inspector was not in a hurry. He unfolded the document with deliberation.

'What have you got there?' I demanded.

'A paper,' he answered, truthfully.

'What about?'

'Between last Saturday night and yesterday morning,' he began, clearing his throat, 'wilful damage was done by some person or persons unknown, to the growing corn behind this house.'

I couldn't wait for the rest of the verbiage. 'So you've come to run me in?' I said, so as to hurry him to the bitter end.

He laughed, almost pleasantly.

'Not quite so bad as that, sir, this time,' he said; 'but I thought perhaps you might be able to give us some little assistance.'

I could hardly believe my ears or eyes. Yet both eyes and ears bore witness that I had been



VIRGINIE

most ludicrously mistaken, and that the inspector and the constable had knocked me up, not as a desperate criminal, but as a respectable ally of law and order. So complete was my surprise that for a few seconds I could only stand staring in amazement.

'Come inside,' I said at last. 'And you must excuse the sharp way I spoke. I've been losing sleep, and I wanted to be quiet.'

'Bit of sunstroke, no doubt,' he said, quite mollified. And he came into the hall.

'Half a minute,' I said. And I slipped into the study, where Lethe was shaking like a leaf, as white as a ghost. It was her first sight of an English policeman; but an English policeman vies with the Matterhorn, and Staffa, and the Castle of Sant' Angelo, as one of the very few facts in the world that cannot be mistaken.

'They shall take me, too!' she began.

'Be quiet,' I murmured. 'Not a sound. It's all right. He doesn't want *me*. He wants . . . him!'

'Him?' Her face became radiant.

'Yes. That is to say, he wants the man who trampled down the corn on Sunday. Wait here, and be good. I shan't be long.'

The inspector condescended to mix for himself the longest drink I ever saw in this world. It consisted of nearly half-a-pint of whisky and the whole contents of a siphon of soda-water, blended in a tall, plain flower-glass, which he mistook for an enlarged and improved tumbler. Between

THE FIRE

two tidal gulps he gave me an account of his errand, adding an expression of his private opinion that the damage 'didn't amount to five bob, anyway,' and that Farmer Jukes, who had set the law in motion, was both the fussiest old freak in all Brattle and the tightest-fisted old miser in the whole county.

'Still,' he added finely, 'I have to do my dooty. So we'll take it, sir, that you don't know anything about it?'

I considered well. Then I answered:

'I know this. A suspicious-looking man, a foreigner, was hanging about here on Sunday. I'm glad you've called. If you hadn't come to see me, I should have had to come and see you.'

He pulled himself together, and opened a frowsy note-book. I went on:

'He's a man I once lent money to. He pretends to be an antiquary — a man who hunts after curious old things, as I do myself. He knows that I treasure what I've got in this house very highly, and he'd like to break in and take it.'

While the inspector plied his fountain pen I gave him a minute description of both Canuto and Nicolo. Also, I described the silver trumpet, but with an express declaration that I did not accuse anybody of stealing it, as I might have dropped it out of my car when I was on the way to exhibit it to friends. The inspector promised cheerfully that if the two aliens shewed the tips of their noses within this jurisdiction they should be put under lock and key within five minutes,

ing to me. I'm on the telephone. If I
up, how many men can you put down
how soon?'

'Certainly three, perhaps four,' he
promptly, in a quarter of an hour — or
Perhaps in ten minutes.'

'Very well,' I said. 'It may be to-
it may be to-morrow. But he'll come.
point I'm positive. And, when he cor
have him.'

'So will old Money-bags Jukes,' chu
inspector. 'He'd hang his own broth
penn'orth of buttercups and daisies, w
gaffer Jukes. No sir, thank you,' he
I indicated the bottle of whisky. 'No
drop. Drinking on dooty is dead ag
rooles.'

He departed and rejoined the parc
stable without pity. I shut the door in
of the flaming sun. Dimness, stillness,
ness reigned once more in the hall.

Lethe came out of the study with slo
'It's arranged,' I said. 'If he comes
again, he will be arrested. Cheer up.
things all right.'



THE FIRE

'You're the best and bravest child ever born,' I answered. And when she only shook her head, I took a tress of black hair between my fingers, and added, 'The bravest, but not the neatest. She's quite old enough to do her own hair. If she won't I'll have to send for Madame Hipkins.'

To laugh her back into gaiety, even out of her blackest woes and fears, was nearly always an easy task. I told her that our turn was coming, and that neither Canuto's persecution nor the mystery of her own past could be kept up much longer. In the end we decided upon a merry evening, and upon a festal dinner, for which I telephoned to the Brattle pastry-cook then and there.



CHAPTER IX

‘Who clanged the gate?’ asked Lethe.

We had nearly finished dinner. I paused in the quartering of a too new Brie cheese, and peeped through the window.

‘The postman,’ I said. ‘He’s coming here.’

Some bulky thing was pushed into the letter-box, and the postman’s knock awoke the echoes. By a common instinct, both of us went into the hall.

‘It’s from him, of course,’ I said, looking at the fat envelope. The post-mark was illegible.

‘Of course,’ said Lethe, in a low, sad tone.

We sat down, and I read the letter, translating it aloud into French as best I could. It ran: —

SOMEWHERE,
NEAR SOMEWHERE ELSE,
Tuesday.

BAD BOY BARRISON,

It was pettish, and spiteful, and naughty of you to cut me off at the telephone. It wounded your poor old uncle to the quick.

Naturally poor old uncle wanted to make sure that you and our Pretty One reached home safe and sound.

THE FIRE

Still, it was nice of you to come to my humble At Home. What did you think of the fireworks?

Indulge an old man in a little harmless vanity, dearest Lionel. Here goes. To be quite candid, I suspect you positively believed that the line of fire on the floor was a real fire, like the fire in the brazier. If you did, I flatter myself that our little show went off rather well.

But, come now, they couldn't have been genuine fires of blazing wood, could they? If they were genuine, how did they go out as promptly as if I'd switched them off like the electric light? No, my boy; the wood was wet, and it only contributed a little smoke.

You want to know how I did it? Remind me next time I call, and I won't refuse information. A thirst for knowledge is always creditable to the young. But, for the present, I've only time to say that they were really and truly fireworks — slow-burning, multi-coloured fireworks, kept alight by puffs of mixed gases escaping through holes in a long pipe under the wet wood. The gasometer was a large rubber sack, placed just outside the door. The pressure was regulated by a most original, ingenious, and effective device. It consisted of Nicolò sitting on the sack, a little bit at a time. When I don't want Nicolò any longer (and we've nearly finished the job for which I engaged him), I mean to sell the whole thing — patent rights, rubber sack; and Nicolò included — as a going concern.



VIRGINIE

But the smartest thing wasn't the fire. It was the sham padlock — the second one — the Padlock that Didn't. No doubt you've guessed by now that it had no heart, or insides, or works, or, to be precise, prehensory organs. Yet Nicolo put it on with such a flourish that, if I hadn't known, I should have said you would have to stay in your little butch until the Crack of Doom — or, at the very least, till to-morrow morning.

In short, 'twas a prettyish piece of stage-management. So was the refrigeration of Lethe the week before last. My tastes have always run that way. I pleaded hard with my cruel father, when I was a chubby boy, to bring me up as a stage-manager; but he preferred to pay twice the premium and to apprentice me to a Scoundrel instead. Not that the Scoundrel business is a bad one. I've been happy and useful in it, and have done fairly well. By the way, if ever you feel inclined to turn Scoundrel yourself, I take a limited number of gentlemanly pupils on favourable terms. I venture to enclose a specimen chapter of my little work, 'The Scoundrel's Handbook,' which may interest you.

I assume that it was you who picked up and carried off my miniature visiting-card (or cardlet) from the road-side. Nicolo went after it in vain.

It would have amused you to see how little trouble we had to secure the use of Sir Pounderby Bluggin's ruins (I may have got his name wrong) for the purposes of our modest entertainment. I arranged it all without going over the head of

THE FIRE

the caretaker. I told him that Nicolo and I were President and Vice-President of the Society for Proving the Existence of Ghosts, and that we were on the track of the Lady Ermyntrude, the sight of whose wandering shade means certain death within the year to all non-members of the Society, and also to members in arrears with their annual subscriptions. We bought a night's use of the whole haunted spot, including the ivied donjon and two tea-urns, for seventeen-and-six. I offered an extra shilling if the caretaker would do the watching in the Lady Ermyntrude's bower, but he declined, owing to an important engagement with his wife.

I admit that our poor fireworks have begrimed the walls, but only in such a manner as to enhance the attractions of the spot. Before handing over the keys this morning, I coached the caretaker carefully in an historical explanation of how the smoke-marks came to be there. He is a slack sort of devil, the caretaker, and has no idea that the smoke-marks haven't been on the stones for years. But he has got my short discourse by heart; and the next pack of Sunday-school trippers will be duly told of the fires lighted by Cromwell and his faithful general Marlborough when they were flying from the hated Spaniard after the battle of Hastings.

On the whole, I found Sir Pounderby's ruins good in quality and reasonable in price. I couldn't have done the job cheaper in Calabria itself. By the way, I blush for our Calabrian novelists as



VIRGINIE

for a pack of fools or churls. *The English romancers have laid so many of their scenes among the mouldering castles of Southern Italy, that it is high time for our South-Italian writers to return the compliment by exploiting your own very excellent ruins. When they have the taste and sense to do so, I venture to hope that the volumes will be largely purchased by our Calabrian peasantry, who too often throw away an absurd proportion of their wages (sometimes amounting to as much as six shillings per week per family) merely in buying food.*

And now, my Barrison, suffer a plain word. Your wine. I have drunk it; and there is a gulf between us.

It was thoughtful of you, and of our Pretty One, to bring breakfast for four. I hope Nicolo didn't lift more than our share out of the basket. You got the flowers? They had been intended, in the first instance, as a trimming for our Lethe's pyre, or bier, in the great Fire-scene, and the ensemble lost its full effect through their absence; but I told Nicolo to pack them in the basket as my thankful contribution to your table decorations.

I return to the wine. Do not mistake me. I recognised it as the ghost, or corpse, of a haughty wine, which had had plenty of fine blood and high breeding to be proud of. But it was not a wine to bounce up and down in a motor-car; nor was it, in any circumstances, a wine with which to wash down sandwiches. You are young, and you will march on in wisdom; but, even after

THE FIRE

making more than due allowances, I must still write of your taste in wine, my Lionel, both in sorrow and in anger.

All my love to Lethe, and (if you are truly penitent about the wine) the rest of it to yourself, from

UNCLE.

Lethe was bursting with comments and questions; but I bade her be still, while we looked into the thin book which had accompanied Canuto's letter — a companion to the two books already in my possession. As usual, there was a bold title-page, which, in this case, read: —

THE
SCOUNDREL'S HANDBOOK
OR
VILLAIN'S VADE-MECUM

BY
LETHE'S AND LIONEL'S UNCLE

CHAPTER VI.

ENGLAND
MCMVI

I

*Frozen ladies should never be placed
curates, poets, or policemen.
Nor with old maids. They are cats.
Nor with Indians. They are all Scour*

II

*Frozen ladies do best in bungalows, in
airy situations.*

III

*Frozen ladies' keepers should be young
men, with plenty of money and plenty of
These must also be men of unbending hono
a boundless capacity for falling hopelessly*

IV

*To find out if a given young English
plenty of leisure, watch him wasting it.
To find out if he has plenty of money
him saving it.
To find out if he is a man of honou
discreet inquiries. For example, suppose*

THE FIRE

last week in Birmingham. Keep your eyes and ears well open. Above all, take a long, long look at the young man himself. If you make a mistake, Providence never called you to be a Scoundrel, and you had better find some other means of making a dishonest living.

V

To be sure that your young Englishman is not already in love with Another (in which case he should never be trusted with a Frozen Lady), watch the postman.

This, however, will be unnecessary in cases where the young Englishman is spending all July digging up cracked (and consequently useless) old bowls and pots; for, if he were in love with Alice — or Bertha, or Kate, or Pussikins, or Gertie, or Isabella — you may be sure that he would be dallying away the leafy month of roses with Alice — or Isabella, or Gertie, or Pussikins, or Kate, or Bertha, as the case may be.

VI

Even in otherwise good homes, Frozen Ladies are sometimes selfishly treated by their keepers in the matter of entertainment and change of air. The run of a house and back-yard is not enough to keep a lively young Frozen Lady in trim. You should therefore see to it that some little distraction, such as a motor-ride or a fire-work display, be occasionally provided.

remaining pages of the book were blank as I turned them over, a thin square of paper fluttered to the ground. Lethe and I picked it up.

'I can read this!' she cried, all excitement in French.'

I looked over her shoulder and perceived the French original of these three lines:

To-morrow is Lethe's birthday. Unhappy that he will not be able to call it but his little present will arrive by parcels-

Clumsily forgetting the poor child's name I asked:

'Is it true? Is to-morrow truly your day?'

She turned away, and I saw how I had drawn her waist within my arm, and, her face was still averted, I knew that she was silently weeping, because a tear fell on my cheek.

'I'm so sorry,' I whispered.

'It is dreadful,' she sobbed. 'My name! Hasn't he been cruel enough, without my name as well? My birthday! You ask me if it is true. And I don't know even my own name!'

THE FIRE

trust me to crush him, and to wring the secret out of him.'

'You are braver than a hero,' she answered, 'but he is cleverer than the devil. This parcel, this present . . . it will be some further outrage.'

'Perhaps it will,' I said, cheerfully. 'But it will be a further clue as well. He does not dream that I have sent for the police. He knows that I have been hiding you from all Brattle, and he thinks I will still fight him and his Nicolo single-handed. Dearest little one, dry your eyes. Before the week is out he'll put his neck into the noose, and you can trust me to draw it tight.'

I begged her to go to bed, reminding her of the fatigues of the day and night last past, and of the possible drain which the morrow's events might make upon her strength.

'But what about . . . you?' she pleaded. 'You fought and slaved while I was sleeping. You need rest more than I. Tell me. Must anyone sit up and watch?'

I knew the strength of the bungalow's defences, and was able to assure her that we were safe so long as we could endure the hardship of sleeping with all windows closed.

'You are sure?' she persisted. 'You promise to go to bed and to sleep?'

'I promise to go to bed,' I said. 'And, though I've never slept in all my life with the window shut, I mean to try. I'll leave my door wide open instead.'

'You must sleep,' she commanded. 'I say



VIRGINIE

you *must*. Don't tease your brain when you lie down, or you'll toss about wide awake all night. Forget everything, and go straight to sleep. You promise ?'

I promised, and she went to her room.

CHAPTER X

I KEPT my word and went straight to sleep. But the gulf of slumber into which I sank as heavily and swiftly as a lump of lead was different from the ocean of unfathomable peace which had rocked me, like a summer sea, on its kindly breast while I slumbered in the warm softness of Lethe's arm. It was an abyss as deep as hell; and as full as hell with shapes of terror.

My dream began abruptly and vividly, as if someone had opened a door and flung me neck and crop into a place of blazing light. The place was like the vaulted hall in the ruined castle, but so vast that, instead of a single column in the centre, the slender, lofty pillars of stone were innumerable, like the trunks of a pine-forest. There was a brazier, a giant brazier, filled with red coals which gangs of shaggy Nicolos were stirring with long silver trumpets till brassy tongues of flame flicked out and licked the bright silver lovingly. Fires were leaping in a long line across the hall; sometimes sinking smoky and dull and low, like a dusty hedgerow in August, sometimes spouting and jetting like geysers among the high, thin columns, or whiz-



VIRGINIE

zing up like rockets to smash their caskets of ruby and amber and violet gems against the black stones of the vault. Now and again, when the blaze crouched down behind a rampart of sooty smoke, spears of white flame darted hither and thither out of the murk; and, once, a hissing, twisting, writhing bulk of fire broke and lurched clear through the entangling fume, like a dragon crawling from a weed-choked cavern.

But these and the monstrous sights which kept them company were only a hideous setting to the central horror of my dream.

Lethe was false. I seemed to be crouching on all fours, like a poor caged beast, behind the bars of the gate which Nicolo had locked in my face. My hair was longer than a lion's mane, and my nails were sharper than a lion's claws, as if I had been enchained for years. Suddenly Canuto appeared near the brazier leading Lethe. She was dressed all in clinging white, with a cold blue belt of steel. Her feet were bare, except for sandals, her cheeks were pale, her hair hung loose upon her shoulders. She looked even more beautiful than she had looked in life. As she stood in the red radiance of the brazier, she might have been a snowy angel descending into hell to speak one soft word of omnipotent love and set the hate-worn captives free. At the sight of her my withered heart quickened and smarted with mad joy. I tried to call to her; but only the pitiable moan of a brute beast escaped my lips. Nevertheless, she heard me; she saw



THE FIRE

me; she knew me; and she came towards me. For a long time she gazed at me through the bars — gazed thirstily, as if she were drinking her fill of a delicious draught. Then she broke into a peal of mocking laughter, as hard and cold and clear as a peal of little iron bells ringing in a stark, wind-bitten tower on a starless night of black frost. The echoes of her laughter fled here and there and everywhere among the stone stems of the countless columns — sharp, lively echoes as if a host of tiny blue birds with glass-bright eyes and cruel beaks were darting about calling and chirping as they flew. A moment afterwards the whole stone forest rocked and rang with answering laughter as if a million fiends were laughing together on every note of a gamut of fifty octaves. At the top was the screaming laughter of evil women; and underneath was a rumbling laughter, duller and deeper than the pounding of surf on a distant shore, like the laughter of witless, brutal giants hardly weaned from the rocky breasts of their mother earth. The laughter rushed at me and mocked me like a living thing. It seemed to break in angry waves against the bars of my prison, scalding and stinging me with boiling and poisoned spray. In the bitterness of my anguish I cried out once more. But this time it was not a beast's moan; it was a man's curse. She turned to Canuto with an imperious gesture of scorn; and, straightway, he struck at me with a blazing brand; and I awoke.



VIRGINIE

So vivid had been the dream that when I opened my eyes and ears upon the darkness and silence of my room, the fires went on burning and the laughter ringing in my brain. Little by little the glow paled and the clamour dwindled; but, even when I was awake enough to know that it had been a nightmare, my heart was still sick and bleeding at the thought of Lethe as a devil and a traitress. I called to mind her angel sweetness and simple innocence. I rebuked myself sharply, in terms of scorn and disgust, for insulting her by a moment's doubt. But doubt would not be denied. Suspicion insisted on being my bedfellow. Who was I, a raw boy, to be so confident about this girl, seeing she was the first I had ever really known? And who was I to deny the ancient doctrine that there is no limit in this world to any woman's power of deceiving any man?

Reinforcements flocked to the vile green flag of jealousy and doubt, a lewd rabble bawling out jeering questions. Why had Lethe, on the margin of the pool, hurried me back with hardly an hour's delay to Brattle? And why had she so coaxingly and persistently persuaded me to go to bed and to sleep instead of letting me watch over herself and the house?

Loathing myself for my disloyalty and mean-heartedness, I wrenched my thoughts away to other things. At the bed-side, on a table, stood a portable electric clock, worked by a small battery. I pressed the stud which controlled it

THE FIRE

and its crystal face beamed with cheerful light. It was only eleven o'clock. Barely an hour had passed since Lethe bade me 'Good-night.' The long-drawn agony of my dream had been an affair of no more than a few minutes — perhaps a few seconds.

I lifted my hand from the stud and the room winked back again into darkness. Entirely awake, I lay motionless and set myself stoutly to think of anybody save Lethe and Canuto. I thought of close-fisted Farmer Jukes and his trodden wheat; of the police-inspector and his bottomless whisky-and-soda; of the landlord's son at 'The Whitford Arms' proudly steering my car to town; of Mrs. Hipkins and the best way of restoring her nineteen shillings and sevenpence; of Sir Robert Stacke and the diggings at the villa; and of the tiresome scribbler who had written the melodramatic novel. But all thoughts led to Lethe. It was Lethe I pictured reclining by the rippling corn; it was Lethe's white little face that peeped through the crack in the study door as the inspector drank his way steadily down and down in the tall flower-glass; it was Lethe, sleeping heavily against my shoulder, whom I saw whenever I thought of the car. When I tried to fill my vision with the unshapely bulk of Mrs. Hipkins, Lethe stole to her side, like a young gazelle sheltering under the rugged flank of a vast and ancient boulder. Among the worn altars of the villa, she moved with the gracious queenliness of a majestic young goddess

Perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes on away. Then I heard a faint sound in I room across the hall, as if someone were st a match.

I raised myself on my elbows and lis The noise was small, but undeniable. A I thought that I must have disturbed Let my own wakefulness; but I remembered th electric clock worked noiselessly, and that not made a sound.

With straining ears I became aware th was opening her door, taking the utmost to avoid the smallest click of the lock or of the hinges. I remembered how I ha her that my own door would be open; bu dently she expected me to be fast asleep, f was carrying a lighted candle.

From the dark corner where my bed s could see her plainly. She had thrown a wrapper or peignoir over her shoulders, se it with a sash of cold blue, like the belt o steel which had girt her white robe in my (As in the dream, her hair hung loosely o shoulders. Only, instead of antique sanda were the French-made blue satin slippers

THE FIRE

the yawning mouths of caverns. My heart throbbed wildly. She was advancing stealthily to my room. What if the dream had been no nightmare, but an inscrutable fore-sight of some crowning woe?

I closed my eyes and forced myself to breathe with the depth and regularity of a man fast bound in natural sleep. But, through the corner of the eyelid which seemed buried in the pillow, I saw her pause upon the door-sill before she entered the room.

She was shading the candle with her hand so that its warm ray was focussed upon her face. Fear of the sable, speechless night paled her cheeks and enlarged her eyes; but she was still the Lethe of my faith and love and worship. If this white maid was a demon at heart, she had indeed come like an angel of light.

With no more noise than if she had been a spirit, she crossed the threshold. I felt rather than saw her approach my bed. The light travelled towards me as silently as a sunbeam flits across a far-off mountain on an April day.

She reached the bed-side and stood still. If she were false, this was the supreme moment. I knew that, if she had come to strike, I must spring at her and grip her on the instant. But in the heart of my soul a voice, resounding like a solemn music, chanted that she was true. Besides, I was a coward before her; and, if she had proved false, I would rather have died.

HAVE AWAKENED. THEN I FELT JUST THE SLIGHT
lifting of my pillow as if someone were
pushing something under it. Last of all
touched my hair with her hand; and, before
flush on my cheeks could tell her of my
she stole swiftly away.

Not till the candle-light had vanished
the hall and I was sure of her door's soft
did I thrust a hand under the pillow to find
key to her errand.

I touched something hard and cold. Even
the dark I knew it by its form and size.
Lethe's little golden cross.

Only by an almost supernatural effort
did I restrain myself from leaping out
and knocking at her door until she should
forth in her white robe to hear me confess
sin and to give me pardon and absolution.
and remorse slashed at me like knives
perceived that at the very moment of my
bouring foul fears and doubts she, my guardian
angel, had been preparing to bless and help
with her grace.

At first I thought of nothing beyond the
fact that Lethe's true and tender heart

THE FIRE

and further into the workings of her child-like mind. Perils, she thought, beset the house. The very windows were barred to shut them out. And she had given up her cross, her talisman, to deliver me from evil.

The simplicity of her faith moved me deeply. I recalled more than one decorative passage of the poets in which effective mention was made of the power of the cross, and of the sign of the cross, against the world and the flesh and the devil. I remembered that fine moment of Gounod's 'Faust' when Mephistopheles recoils, cowering, from the cruciform sword-hilts of the chanting crowd. And I marvelled that, to Lethe, this power of the cross was not a mere literary prettiness or a theatrical effect, but a solid truth of the universe. I marvelled; but, twisted up with all my wonder and pride and gratitude at her simple faith, was the subtle arrogance of a superior person graciously tolerating picturesque superstition.

Suddenly the scales fell from my eyes. With the golden cross still in my hand, I seemed to see another cross, a great cross of wood, glimmering through the darkness of the room. It was only a fancy, and it faded as quickly as it came; but, for the first time in my life, my soul climbed the sorrowful hill of Calvary. In spirit, I looked up at the Crucified. I felt sin and hell closing upon Him like a sea of pitch alive with voiceless and sightless monsters. But the arms of the cross, outstretched like His own, held all that



VIRGINIE

evil at bay, and pointed its ways back to the uttermost east and west, and bade it be gone.

I knew what Lethe would have had me do. I laid her cross on my breast, and, very soon, drowsiness stole over me. The horrid figments of my dream withdrew to the ends of the world, and the soft reality of Lethe's visit brooded over me like the wings of a mild dove.

And so I fell asleep.



BOOK IV
THE MIST





CHAPTER I

A SLASH of rain across the misty casement woke me up. It was broad daylight, and the hands of the clock pointed to ten minutes past six.

Nearly seven hours of perfect sleep had recharged me with life and hope. The burns on my hands and arms were so far healed that I was able to fling off all the bandages save a pair of narrow linen wristlets. Whatever the parcels-post might bring, I felt ready for it and for all that might follow in its train.

In my bathroom I repressed noisy splashings and bathed as quietly as an old carp in a pond. After her midnight vigil, I was determined that Lethe's brief span of sleep should not be cut short until the postman was within half an hour of being due. But my velvety footsteps were measured out in vain; for hardly had I returned from a stealthy waylaying of the milkman, through the dining-room window, before I heard her moving briskly about.

I went from room to room, opening the casements and drinking in new life from the clear sharp air and the sounding, pouring rain. Across the road a tiny brook which had been dry for



VIRGINIE

a month was already full of water, and its deep chaunt boomed a sonorous bass to the fitful descant of the rain and the staccato cries of birds. A pool had already formed on the gravel, and two curling petals of roses, a red and a white, were floating about in it, like rival galleys high-pooped and high-prowed. Overhead, the sky was all grey, dumped with swollen rain-clouds. On the whole, although the booming and plashing and gurgling and bubbling were dreary in themselves, the rain pleased me. I felt like a man about to be beleaguered in a castle who sees the water rising in the moat while his ears are still astrain for the first far challenge of the besiegers' trumpets. Whatever Canuto's plans might be, this deluge was not likely to help them.

Lethe joined me in the kitchen. But, before I could ask her how she had slept, she began:

'These flowers. They are faded. Is it too wet to get me some fresh ones?'

She held out a white jar of dying roses which we had carelessly left on a side table instead of throwing them away when we started on our midnight flight to London. That Lethe should wish me to risk a soaking in order to gratify her mere whim surprised me. It was the first time she had shewn the faintest tinge of selfishness or thoughtlessness. What puzzled me still more was the nervous awkwardness of her manner.

'Give me the jar,' I said. And I dived into

THE MIST

the heart of the downpour. But just as I had torn two or three drenched blossoms from the nearest stem, I heard her cry,

‘Come in!’

‘In a minute,’ I answered.

‘This moment,’ she commanded, ‘or I shall come and fetch you.’

As she made a step forward I waved her back and returned to shelter.

‘You didn’t give me time to get any,’ I said, handing her three half-dismembered roses.

‘They’re quite enough,’ she answered, laying them aside without bestowing on them more than a glance. ‘Now go and change your coat at once. I’ll hang this one near the stove to dry.’

In my dulness I did not divine the motive of her ruse until I obeyed her orders and went to my bedroom for a dry coat. Then light flashed over me, and I pushed aside my pillow where she had placed her little golden cross. The cross was gone. The few seconds of my tugging at the rain-broken roses had sufficed her; and she believed that I did not know her secret.

At breakfast she asked if I had rested well; and I told her, truthfully, that I had slept for hours and hours without a break. Answering on her own account, she confessed that she had not fallen asleep till midnight, but that, from midnight onwards, all had been well.

I said nothing about her birthday; and neither of us mentioned Canuto and his promised parcel.



VIRGINIE

But we caught each other more than once glancing at the clock; and I was glad to have the cruel tension ended by the postman's knock. In the outskirts of Brattle, parcels and letters were delivered at one and the same time, soon after seven.

She laid her hand on my arm and followed me into the hall, only letting me go so that she could slip out of sight when I opened the door.

From the shelter of his cape of dripping oil-skin the postman produced a registered packet. It was quite small, neatly wrapped in French-grey paper, and sealed with plain seals.

'Sign,' said the postman.

My heart beat faster as I took up the docket to sign it. Knowing that the parcel was for Lethe, I fully expected Canuto to have addressed it to her in some outrageous fashion. But, to my relief, the name on the label, in Canuto's writing, was my own.

As soon as the man had gone and the door was shut, Lethe ran to me in unsuppressed excitement. I held out the packet, label uppermost.

'It isn't for me,' she said, dazed.

'No,' I said. 'But it's from . . . him. We won't open it here. I don't trust it. Let's open it just outside the kitchen door.'

If somebody had forced me to make three guesses at the parcel's contents, I should have guessed, first, that it held some mocking gift of flowers and cakes and toys; or, second, that it was a bundle of Canuto's little manuscript

THE MIST

volumes; or, third, that it was some infernal jack-in-the-box contrivance which would so fill the room with soporific vapours that Canuto and Nicolo would be able to enter the bungalow and kidnap one or both of us as they had done before at the cross-roads. This third guess was unlikely to be correct, if only on the ground that Canuto was not the sort of man to repeat himself; but nothing could be lost by cautiousness, so we carried the parcel to the kitchen door whence I could fling it far into the garden at the first sniff of chemicals.

The brook was thundering louder than ever, but the rain was abating. Lethe handed me a table-knife, and I cut the string. No clock-work whirred inside the packet and no fumes escaped from its corners. I drew off the French-grey paper and found inside another parcel wrapped in bright new tin-foil and tied with sky-blue ribbon. Along the ribbon, in silver letters, ran the name 'VIRGINIE.'

The tin-foil made me suspicious, and I was about to place the whole thing down on the ground when Lethe leaned forward and read the silver letters.

As if she had been stabbed, she put her hand to her heart. Her cheeks became as white as marble. She gave a great cry. Then she tottered towards me, swaying from side to side and clutching at the air with both her outstretched hands. If I had not caught her she would have fallen.



VIRGINIE

‘For God’s sake,’ I cried, ‘what has happened?’

With unutterable rage and despair, I fancied that some fiendish emanation from the bright box had already struck to her brain, and that, in a few moments, I too would sink after her into an unconsciousness from which we should awake to new outrage and anguish. But she had not swooned. Crushing herself madly against me, she wailed:

‘Virginie . . . Virginie . . . Virginie . . . I am Virginie!’

‘Virginie?’ I echoed.

‘Yes. Virginie. I am Virginie. It has come back to me . . . my name.’

Not until that moment had I known how foolishly they speak who say that there is nothing in a name, and that a name is no more than an arbitrary label. Rushing back upon Lethe, her name seemed to smite her, as a gust of wind smites reeds, bending her once more against my shoulder. After its long exile, her name had to cut a cruel way as with a flaming sword back to the inmost places of her being; and her sharp cry was like the cry of a new-born child when its soul breaks in with the first breath of life.

‘Your name —,’ I began. But she recovered herself quickly and plucked the package from my hand. The flimsy ribbon snapped asunder and the tin-foil gaped open.

Canuto’s birthday-present was a small thick prayer-book, with tarnished gilt edges and leather

THE MIST

covers much the worse for wear. As the tin-foil fell to the ground, I stretched out my hand to take the book from her; but Lethe held it tight in both palms and gazed at it till I thought her eyes would pierce it through.

'It's a prayer-book,' I said, taking a step towards her. But she recoiled.

'It's mine!' she said, passionately. 'It's mine. You shan't take it away.' And she clasped it jealously to her bosom, as if it had been a tiny pet animal which I was seeking to destroy.

'Gabrielle gave it me,' she added defiantly, 'at the convent. It's my own.'

'Of course it's your own,' I said. 'You shall have it back. I only want to make sure that he hasn't put anything in it — a letter, or anything of that kind.'

She hesitated.

'Only for half a minute,' I said.

She came to herself all of a sudden and thrust the book into my hand with shame-faced haste.

'Forgive me,' she pleaded. 'I was silly. Keep it as long as you like.'

As I turned over the leaves, a thin oblong card fluttered to the floor. I picked it up and saw that it was a small chromograph, such as they shew side by side with rosaries and candles and crucifixes and pious images in the shops opposite great churches in France. The upper part, printed in gold and colours, represented a Gothic chancel, with a young girl in white kneel-



VIRGINIE

ing at the altar-rail and a priest in a chasuble holding a pyx. The lower part contained the printed words, 'Eglise de Pont-le-Duc, Loire Inférieure; Souvenir de Première Communion,' followed by two written lines in faded ink which ran, 'Virginie Louise de Méricourt; Fête de l'Assomption, 1896.'

She waited hungrily.

'If you are Virginie,' I said, 'your full name is Virginie Louise de Méricourt. Look. Somebody wrote it on this card, ten years ago, at your first communion.'

She took the card and looked at it, attentively and gravely, as one looks at a newly-found portrait of a friend long lost. After a long time she said, quietly and simply,

'I am Virginie de Méricourt. I remember this card. There ought to be some other cards in the book as well — Our Lady of Perpetual Succour against a gold background, and St. Philomena with a palm-branch, and St. Anthony of Padua preaching to the fishes, and the little Infant Jesus of Prague.'

The cards were there, and others also, just as they had been placed here and there between the leaves either as book-markers or as aids to devotion. But the book did not hold the smallest scrap of Canuto's writing, nor had he inscribed a single word on the wrappings except the name of Virginie on the blue ribbon and my own on the outside label.

I glanced at Lethe. She was leaning against

THE MIST

the further door-post staring vacantly at the rain. Some seconds passed. Then she raised her open hand to her forehead and covered her eyes; and I knew that she was vainly making the last and most desperate of her efforts to remember. Before she could realise her failure and defeat, I touched her hand. She started violently and turned upon me with a look of bitter disappointment.

'You've made me lose it,' she burst out, in a tone of reproach. 'It was all coming back, and you've driven it away?'

'No,' I explained, gently. 'It wasn't all coming back. You were only hurting your poor heart and head. You were trying in vain to see everything as clear as noon-day in one great blaze. You won't remember that way. We must go slowly, one short step at a time. Hold this book in your hand and look at these cards quietly and easily, and wait and see if any picture will come to you of the church at Pontle-Duc.'

With all her old dutifulness she obeyed. I peeped over her shoulder as she looked first at the gaudy cards and then at the printed pages with their prayers and rubrics in French and Latin. But no flash of recollection brightened her face. She shook her head and sighed heavily.

'Then don't bother about the church,' I said. 'Put it out of your mind. Your house? The village? Last week you used to gaze at the corn-field and the elms and the hills; and you



VIRGINIE

used to say that, if this thing were here and the other thing away, it would be like Savoy or Holland.' Perhaps it's like Pont-le-Duc.'

She shook her head and sighed more heavily than before.

'Your house, for example,' I coaxed, taking her hand and striving to vivify her memory with the whole force of my sympathy, 'the house where you were a little girl. You told me about a big room with a window looking towards a dismal sea. There were sand-hills and pines. You were playing with a doll, you said, and it was raining.'

Her hand, which had lain as numb as a white stone in mine, began to warm and tingle. She gripped my fingers with the strength of a man.

'Hush,' she commanded. 'Listen!'

I returned her pressure and listened.

'The brook—the rain in the brook! Hark! I remember one day . . . It was stifling and sultry. There had been a thunderstorm in the night; but another thunderstorm was just beginning. I remember standing in the garden. The roses were battered and scattered and the lilies broken—like these. I stared at the sea, all dull and solid, like old lead. The tide must have been at the full; because, over the sand-hills I could see the water, tilted up and looking as if it were higher than the land. The swell was bumping, now and then, on the beach, and it sounded like a muffled drum. Up in the sky the thunder of the coming storm was muffled too,

THE MIST

because it was still far away. But the river was the most dreadful, the most muffled of all. Its bed was in a ravine, a deep ravine, choked with willows and poplars and stunted oaks. There seemed to be thunder everywhere — muffled, sulky, cowardly thunder, without lightning, muttering and growling and afraid to speak. Then Justine came out into the garden and said ——'

Perhaps, in my eagerness, I pressed her fingers too hard. For Justine vanished utterly from the picture, and my poor Lethe once more held her free hand to her forehead.

'It was thunder everywhere,' she said, almost fretfully. 'And it made me afraid. And it gave me a headache. I seem to feel it now.'

Convinced that nothing useful would recur to her tormented mind, I began pleading with her to give up the barren struggle; and, tearfully and ruefully, she tried to obey.

By this time I was growing accustomed to the lark-like swiftness with which she could spring and soar from the murkiest and straitest pit of trouble up into the clear bright sky of new hope. None the less, I was staggered by the confident abruptness with which she suddenly turned on me and demanded:

'When are we going to start?'

I was dumb.

'Why not this moment?' she continued. 'I mean, in half an hour. I didn't unpack my box last night — only a few things at the top. I can



VIRGINIE

be ready at once. Besides, all the rest of my things will be *there*, won't they?'

At her haste to be away, and at the thought that I was bound to surrender her to her own flesh and blood, my heart sickened. But my mind went on working and I saw in the clearest light what I ought to do. Lethe was right. By dashing upon Pont-le-Duc without an hour's delay we could arrive in the midst of Lethe's family, or, at the very least, in the midst of adequate clues, half a day before Canuto could expect us. Our obvious route would be by night-boat from one of the South-coast ports; but I calculated that it would be just possible to reach London in time to catch the eleven o'clock boat-train for Dover. We could get clear of Calais by three in the afternoon, dine in Paris, and travel all night, reaching the estuary of the Loire in time for a very early breakfast. Fortunately my own bag had not been unlocked. I felt that everything might hang on my appearing voluntarily before Lethe's guardians and upon my getting in the first word.

'Pleasel' prayed Lethe, with upturned, troubled face. My silence had made her fear that I would postpone or forbid the journey. 'Please! Do let us start now.'

'We will start now,' I said. 'Bring warm things for the boat and for the train-journey to-night. I can give you a quarter of an hour.'

She flew like the wind. I telephoned to the station for a four-wheeler. Then I swept the

THE MIST

larder of all perishable provisions, flinging them on an out-of-the-way patch of wet grass to be fought for by the cats and the crows. I made all the windows fast and went into the study to hunt up a passport, dated only a few months before, which might, I thought, prove useful.

The passport lay in a little drawer among the most sacred of my belongings. As I lifted it a tiny case of morocco leather met my eye. It was the case that held my mother's wedding-ring.

An idea struck me. I took up the case. Then I hesitated and nearly put it back again. But an inward voice encouraged me; and I knew that it was an impulse of reverence which had stirred me, not a temptation to sacrilege. I withdrew the ring from its case and locked the drawer.

When she met me in the hall Lethe was working on a long glove.

'See,' I said, leading her gently to the window, where she had slipped her arm through mine during our solemn talk in the Sunday twilight.

'It is a ring,' she said, wondering.

'Yes. A ring — a wedding-ring. Dearest Virginie, you know you can trust me always. But we have to travel together a whole day and a whole night, by mail-boats and crowded trains. We have to pass through two capitals. It is better that you should wear this ring. When we arrive . . . there, you can take it off at once.'

She blushed deeply and turned away. It was



VIRGINIE

not a blush of coyness; for I could see her girlish shoulders tremble.

I bent over her, and said very softly in her ear:
'It was my mother's.'

She held out her left hand. Nor, when the ring was in its place, did she draw her hand away, but let it rest in mine.

CHAPTER II

LETHE'S first visit to London was not long protracted. Our train up from Brattle was eight minutes late, with the result that I had to crowd into eight minutes more the buying of our tickets for Paris and the transferring of ourselves and our scanty baggage from one side of the station to the other. The boat-train was so nearly full that we were bundled into a compartment plentifully stocked with elderly maidens on the way to Switzerland. There were four of them, one in each corner seat, and, as we sat down with our backs to that wall of the carriage which was nearest to France, they eyed Lethe with resentment, and myself with reproach. They reminded me of the four ill-tempered stone beasts who represent the Four Evangelists at the four corners of a Byzantine font or pulpit.

While Lethe divided her time between looking out of the windows and wading through a heap of ladies' papers, I fought a pitched battle with the French railway time-tables and won. Meanwhile the elderly maidens opened, and closed, and re-opened, and re-closed, and half re-opened the windows a great many times, and changed corners

could hardly persuade her to turn her
peep at the cathedral and the cast
Faversham, about noon, the sun shone
as we rushed through Canterbury the
three towers and wet roofs were glitter
At Dover the sea and sky were both of
blue, heightening the whiteness of the
cliff.

Lethe clung to me as we descended :
way to the throbbing, hissing steame
distinctly heard the least beautiful of th
maidens exclaim to the least beautiful
that people really might try to keep all
of thing for private consumption, and
public, it made her sick. I turned an
first, the eye of the least beautiful but
looked abashed that I had heard; and
the eye of the least beautiful of all, w
delighted.

In the eyes of the passengers general
was the success of the morning. Nea
body looked at us again and again d
crossing; and, so far as I could read th
it seemed to be the common opinion tha
lucky devil. upon whom a delicious an

THE MIST

scious voyage to Westhampton in the dark company of Nicolo and Canuto, this was Lethe's first taste of a ship's deck and an open sea. She noticed everything, and asked dozens of questions, without wasting time in listening to my replies. Indeed, some of the questions were unanswerable. For example, after the purser had gone through his ritual of tearing coupons out of our books and handing us landing-tickets in exchange, Lethe made a little mouth at the time-worn, weather-stained bits of pasteboard, and demanded:

'Why don't they give us clean ones?'

Half way over, I got up to pull back her chair a foot or two, out of the swishes of spray. And it was then that an odd thing happened. Unseen by Lethe, as I stood behind the chair, a motherly face came close to my cheek, and a motherly voice in my ear whispered:

'I can't help it!'

The motherly face belonged to a middle-aged, shapeless little woman, in an over-sized golf-cape.

'Can't help it?' I echoed, puzzled.

'No,' she whispered. 'I can't help saying how I wish that you will both be very, very happy.'

I understood, and I could not be resentful. But I indicated Lethe by a gesture, and mutely begged our well-wisher to let us take her goodwill for granted.

'Of course,' she went on, bringing her lips closer to my ear, and whispering quieter, 'of

were very different in those days. 11
we're having this little trip now. I can
speaking. And I only wish you may be
happy as my husband and I have been
years.'

When the little woman's happy spouse
her, I identified him at once with a d
burgess, as round as a barrel, who had
most of the time since we left the white
Albion in declaiming, with excessive heat
the company's charge of one shilling each
hire of a deck-cushion and a deck-rug
did my honest best to look down through
surface absurdity into the remains of
woman's romance.

Ere long France humped up out of the
waters. When Lethe saw it, her rattling
tions ceased, and she sat in silence until
make out the fretted belfry of Calais,
blunt spire of the church, and the many
squares of divers crops on the steep up
Cap Blanc Nez, all bright after the rain.

We landed.

'Virginie is in France,' I said.
glad?'

THE MIST

ourselves, after running the gauntlet of the customs without having to turn a key or unbuckle a strap. But Lethe would hardly eat. Her thoughts were far away.

‘Do you think . . .?’ she began.

‘Do I think what?’

‘Do you think . . . that I have a sister?’

‘If you have,’ I said, ‘she won’t be as nice as you.’

‘I’m sure she’ll be much nicer,’ retorted Lethe, with spirit.

‘If she’s nicer,’ I said, ‘you won’t mind if I fall in love with her instead of you?’

She darted at me a startled glance. But I could tell that it was the newness of the thought, more than the thought itself, which hurt her; and, as soon as she saw that I was not in earnest, she merely shook her head, with a reproving smile, and went on musing.

‘Do you think I have a brother?’ was her next enquiry.

‘No,’ I answered out loud. But, in my own heart, I added, ‘If you have, I’ll be bound that there won’t be a thoroughly good understanding till I’ve punched his head.’

She sighed, and said:

‘I should love to have a brother.’

‘No doubt you would,’ I grunted, ‘seeing I’ve been such a failure.’

She looked at me, flushing crimson.

‘You are not kind,’ she said. ‘It isn’t kind to talk like that.’

posures of the infamies of their political opinions and embellished with muddily printed or of mediocrities who had either just finished this life or just arrived in Paris. We sat upon two corner seats in a compartment the remaining corners had been bespoken by persons, who had placed each a Gladstone on a seat. The owners of the bags lingered until the shouts of 'En voiture' reaching their climax; and, for a moment I prepared myself for a raid by Nicolo and at the instant of the train's departure it was a false alarm. The lingering luncheon out to be no worse than an Irish bishop's secretary on their way to Rome. These holy men tamed Lethe to a due time and, as they conned their breviaries for the time, her prattle was chastened.

Boulogne, the old, French, leafy, silvery logne, throned high within her grey towers, and shutting her ears against the din of the new, garish, English Boulogne disappointed Lethe as she caught a glimpse of the dome from the bridge over the Liane.

THE MIST

and landscapes we passed uncongenial, and, more than once, she said sadly:

‘It is not like France.’

Beyond Amiens the bishop became friendly. A trifling transaction in the matter of my timetable opened conversation. He invited us to sympathise with a luckless prelate bidden suddenly to Rome in flaming August; and, with an approving glance at poor, shy Lethe, he slyly congratulated me on having shut myself out from an episcopal career. Like Lethe, the bishop wore a cross upon his breast, and as the gold flashed in the afternoon sun from his black broadcloth and from her blue serge, another irony was added to my honeymoon by the presence and blessing of the Church.

Paris looked grimy, tasted gritty, felt stuffy, smelt unclean. From the Gare du Nord we drove at once down the straight mile of the Boulevard de Sébastopol towards the Seine. The shops had a third-rate air, and the tourists and natives loafed up and down the soiled pavements jadedly. I asked Lethe what she thought of Paris, and she answered, sadly, that it was horrid.

To mend matters, I told the driver at the Place du Châtelet to turn eastwards along the quay, so that Lethe might see the Hotel de Ville and Notre Dame as we crossed the two arms of the river. The airy spaces revived her, and the twin towers of the great church made her stand up in the fiacre to look; but we were both glad when

minutes after nine. The hotel people, received my telegram from Boulogne, and told us with the good news that our baths were ready and that dinner would be served in the little salon at eight.

I had seen the little salon before, and now I came to see it many times again. It was a room of old-world France. On the polished, waxed floor it took a man all his time to keep it shining. The chairs, the mirror, the clock, the vases, the cornices, nearly a hundred years old, were all so well-preserved but mellowed by the age which first cast irreverent eyes upon them. The Empire style and applied it to the furniture of shop-keepers' houses and country inns. singly, nearly every object in the room was good and vulgar; but, taken together, the gildings and brocaded hangings, and overgrown ornaments made a whole which was fragrant, lightful, and even homely.

While I was waiting in the hall for my wife to descend, the landlord took occasion to tell me upon the fatigues evidently experienced by Madame my wife in the course of the journey from England to Paris. He went on to

THE MIST

— for I had taken the precaution of putting him off the scent by naming Marseilles instead of Nantes as our goal. And when Lethe tripped down the broad old staircase, freshened by her bath and radiant with pleasure at her return to truly French France, he was unable to repress an almost scornful:

‘Surely Monsieur will remain until the morning?’

On my polite but decisive refusal, he departed, shrugging his shoulders, as if I had been a madman, or a brute, or, most likely of all, a muff with ice-water instead of blood, and a knob of flint instead of a heart. But there were no traces of malice in the dinner which began to appear a minute later. The French vermouth, of which I drank a long drink while Lethe sipped a short sip, was pale and dry; the ‘rillettes,’ from Tours, were in tiny brown terrines, not much roomier than egg-cups; and the *pot-au-feu* proved triumphantly that we were indeed revisiting the land of soup, and that we had left the land of pease-porridges and beef-teas far behind. The whiting, each fish curling round on the dish so that he could nibble his own tail; the mutton steak as tender as the young *haricots verts* which girdled it; the two small, round, white dishes of cauliflowers melting away in creamy sauce; the duckling, brought ceremoniously to the table in a casserole well lined with green peas; the salad of soft-leaved lettuce — all these were welcome fare after our twelve hours of travel and our twelve

with a wonderfully shaped and colour
for Lethe, called a "floating island."

While the meal lasted I would not al
to talk, save on passing points of gour
But when the coffee appeared, along
wax candles in two triple candlestick
silver, she sighed, and said slowly, as if
speaking to herself:

'My name is Virginie Louise de Mé
I dreaded questions; so I answered.

'For the present you are Virginie
Barrison. Do as you're told. Drink yo
Don't talk. We start for the station
minutes.'

But I might as well have kept silenc
remained half sunk in her own thought

At a quarter past nine we were se
our baggage, in a fiacre. As loudly as w
I told the driver to go to the Lyons st
it was not till we reached the Pont St
changed the orders and named the Gr
léans. As we bowled along the Quai
Bernard, with the great shadows of t
des Plantes on one side and the cool, sil



THE MIST

that the City of Light should be for me and for Lethe no more than a breathing-space in a weariful flight, like the great lantern of a rocking lightship on which two wild birds rest for a moment before they dash on again over fifty leagues of sulky water, through fifty leagues of chilly gloom.



CHAPTER III

As far as Etampes, which is about an hour's run from Paris, my plucky Lethe kept herself awake. But the wear and tear of her three exciting days had begun to tell, and, in spite of all her rubbings of eyes and sudden sittings up, sleep exacted its full toll at last.

Our compartment was reserved right through to Nantes, seven hours' journey beyond Etampes, and as the train climbed up to the high corn-lands of the Beauce I devoutly hoped that the poor child's peaceful slumber might endure all the night. She reclined opposite to me, in the corner, her head nearly buried in a great pillow half as big as herself, and for five or six minutes her sleep seemed restful and profound. But a jolt of the train aroused her, and she started up, with a wild moan of fear.

It was in vain that I coaxed her to sit beside me and to rest against my arm. Thrice within half-an-hour she protested that her drowsiness was gone; thrice her head drooped back against the pillow, and the tired lids closed over her aching eyes; thrice she leapt back into consciousness with a moan, or a start, or a cry. At her

THE MIST

third awakening, I knew that we were near Orléans, for the corn-fields had given place to vineyards, very good to see in the moonlight; so I kept her awake until we had cleared the noisy junction of Les Aubrais and were smoothly on the way to Tours. Then, without leave-asking or argument, I crossed over to her corner, drew her away from the pillow, and, sitting down in her old place, took her gently in my arms, with her head upon my shoulder. She resisted a little, and tried to rebuke me, but returning heaviness cut her short in the middle of a sentence, and she sank quietly to sleep.

The train pounded on through the silvery dusk, following the seaward course of the gleaming Loire. From time to time castles and churches and white villages shewed themselves above the gardens and vineyards. We were speeding through a land of plenty on a night of peace. I looked at Lethe. Her flower-like hands were clasped in her lap, but the hand which wore the plain gold ring was uppermost. And then I thought my thoughts.

Was this indeed my honeymoon — the only honeymoon I should have in all my life? It was more than possible. Before the next day's noon it might easily befall that Lethe would be lost to me for ever. How did I know that when the scroll of Canuto's mystery was opened it would not turn out to be also the death-warrant of my happiness?

For a brief spell I wavered. Why should I be



VIRGINIE

an unpractical, suicidal fool? Lethe was sleeping gently against my heart. Why should not this delicious possessing of her endure to my life's end? The map of France unrolled itself before my mind's eye, and I traced a cross-country route from Tours eastward to Dijon, and thence northward to Metz. In some capital of North Germany, where the Latin Canuto would be out of his groove, I could hold Lethe safe while trusty agents ferreted out the truth at Pont-le-Duc.

Other fears came thronging up to swell the voice of the tempter. Was it not reasonable to expect that Canuto had anticipated my rush to France, and that he would be waiting in Brittany with a new apparatus of horror? If so, should I have a better chance of beating him on his own ground than I had had on my own? In dragging Lethe to Pont-le-Duc was I not a brute, handing her over to fresh outrage? Again, even if Canuto remained in England and never crossed my path again, how could I be sure that the people to whom I was about to restore Lethe were not harsh and unsympathetic, or even cruel?

But I bade Satan get behind me. Over and above the answers which cool reason supplied to these cowardly questions, I began to regain my impregnable conviction that our dash to the West was the only wise and honourable course. The mystery must be solved some day. Some day Lethe's family must be found and faced. And, some day, Canuto must be brought to a reckon-

THE MIST

ing and be shorn of his power for evil. I looked at my watch. It was past midnight.

'Some day,' I said to myself. 'It has to be, some day! And the day has come.'

Nevertheless, I felt again that perhaps the mid-day bells would toll my knell, and that the point to which I was steering might prove to be a rock on which my barque would shiver to pieces rather than a safe haven of sunny waters. I knew. And it was bitter. It was bitter to look at the ring on my bride's finger, and to think of the thousands of humdrum lovers for whom this August night would be the silver threshold of long life together, while I, who loved Lethe with a love stronger than the sun at noon-day, was perhaps cherishing her through the mild night only for the pitiless morning to snatch her away. It was bitter to feel that this our bridal was perhaps an end, instead of a beginning; a blank, high wall, instead of a rose-arched wicket; a parting of dusty ways, instead of a meeting of bright waters. But we did not change at Tours.

At moonset the mists mounting from the invisible river began to be weirdly luminous with the first weak gleams of dawn, and soon after we left Saumur I could make out the huge embankment of the Loire, which kept us dreary company as we ran beside it for half-a-dozen leagues. At last I saw the hot young sun breaking through a purple copse on a hill-top to the east, and burning like a forest fire. It warmed my blood and stoutened my heart.



VIRGINIE

Lethe was my bride. If any other man should presume to set up a legal claim, I swore that law should clash against law till her chains were broken. If there had been a marriage — and this was my only lasting fear — it must have been a marriage brought about by duress or trickery, and it should be set at naught. But in the sight of God and all his angels, Lethe was my bride. I held her to me proudly at the thought, and, without waking, she turned in her sleep so that her hair touched my cheek. Then I, too, gave up the fight against drowsiness, and we slept as peacefully as two children, while the great dumb mists hung round us, all golden and rosy, like dreams.

CHAPTER IV

OF set purpose I missed the connection at Nantes. We could have pushed on westward twenty minutes after our arrival; but there were good reasons for a short break of journey. By the earlier train we should have reached Pont-le-Duc soon after eight o'clock, and it pleased me better to enter Lethe's territory a little later, when all the world would be astir; for I believed that if Canuto had preceded us a crowd would hardly suit his plans. Again, Nantes was the capital of Loire-Inférieure, and there were sure to be directories which would give a certain amount of information about Pont-le-Duc and the family of de Méricourt. Last, and not least, but still considerable, was our need for tubbing and changing clothes.

Leaving the porter to follow with the luggage we walked the few yards to the Hotel de la Duchesse Anne; and, while our rooms were being made ready, we strolled past the vast castle up an old-grown avenue until we reached the east-end of a modern-looking church bulking up hugely. A clock struck six.

'It is the cathedral,' said Lethe.



VIRGINIE

'It can't be,' I objected. 'It's too new.'

'But it is,' she persisted. 'The best way in is to go right round it. There are towers and lovely carvings on the front.'

So easily and completely had the sight of the building revived her memories of it that she was not conscious of any change in herself. Fearful of startling her back again into forgetfulness, I held my tongue and followed her into the north transept, where she pointed out, with delight, the amazing black and white marble tomb of a Duke of Brittany. From the transept we went along to one of the chapels of the choir where a priest was saying Mass before a score or so of the faithful; and she made me kneel until the last gospel. Finally, she took me back to the castle and to the hotel by a short cut, leading the way with unconscious certainty. I marvelled and was thankful, but still held my tongue.

While Lethe was dressing, I went for a swim in an open-air bath moored between two islands in the Loire; and, long before she had finished, I was back at the hotel turning over the pages of the 'Annuaire du Département.' But I could learn nothing beyond the bald fact that a Gaston de Méricourt lived, or maintained a house, in the very small commune of Pont-le-duc.

Even if two voluble natives had not been making the dust fly with their busy brooms in the *salle-à-manger*, I should still have asked for breakfast to be served in private. We drank our chocolate and ate our tiny white eggs in Lethe's



THE MIST

bedroom, at a window looking over the square. Neither of us spoke much. Indeed Lethe had been unusually quiet from the moment of my arousing her as the train ran into Nantes. She seemed to be lost, not in thought, but in dreams or in half-dazed anticipations.

Not knowing the future, I reserved the rooms as headquarters, and we left the hotel with so little luggage that we might have been mere sight-seers starting for a stroll round the churches and picture-galleries to fill up the hours until lunch. Indeed, I carried nothing beyond some money, the passport, and such letters from Canuto as might enable Lethe's friends to identify her abductor.

Before nine o'clock we were once more clanking along in a west-bound train. We rode with three artillery officers, whose wandering glances forced Lethe to direct her own through the window, towards the ugly lead-works and factories on the islands and the river banks. Soon after ten we left the train and boarded a small steamer which lay waiting to ferry passengers across the broad mouth of the Loire. To our right, as we steamed over, spread the glittering, salt Atlantic; to our left the lordly river came marching proudly down to its resplendent grave. But Lethe saw these bright sights only dimly; for she had obeyed orders, and had tied over her face and under her chin a veil thick enough to hide her features until the time came to reveal them.

When we stepped off the pier on the south



VIRGINIE

side of the estuary, we were done with the steam-engine, and had to fall back upon the horse. According to the innkeeper, we could reach Pont-le-Duc about noon. But while his wife was in the house with Lethe, vainly coaxing her to eat and drink, he freely confessed to me that why anyone should spend twelve francs in going to Pont-le-Duc passed his comprehension. It was a poor place, he said; poor, and small, and dull, with nothing to go and look at and nobody to go and speak to.

‘Then it’s worth seeing,’ I said. ‘A place with no one in it is something fresh.’

‘There are a few fishermen there; but they’re all away at the Island — at the cod-fishing, at Newfoundland,’ he admitted, making his Breton bull quite naturally. ‘And there are some little farmers. And some foresters. That’s all. No shops. No doctor. Not even a curé.’ And, after a pause, he added unanswerably, ‘Because the old curé’s dead, and they’ve never sent a new one.’

My heart was beating fast. But I maintained an off-hand manner and said, in a careless tone:

‘That’s funny. In my country there’s generally somebody. There’s nearly always a family — a big house.’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘There is a château at Pont-le-Duc,’ he said, ‘but I wouldn’t put Monsieur’s dog in it.’

‘A château?’ I yawned. ‘Whose?’

THE MIST

'A gambler's, Monsieur. And a drunkard's. The château belongs to Monsieur de Méricourt. But he is no good. His father before him was no better, and his grandfather was worse. No, Monsieur. No de Méricourt was ever any good.'

'You know them, then?' I asked, with boredom on my lips and anguish in my heart.

'We all know them, Monsieur; for we have all suffered. Yet I ought to say that not one of us knows them. The de Méricourts only come to Pont-le-Duc nowadays to be buried. No. There is nothing to do or to see at Pont-le-Duc. But Monsieur can prove it for himself. The horses are ready.'

I turned away, thanking God that Lethe had not heard. But what was I to do? Was I to break her heart by leading her through a tangled garden to a fallen roof-tree, an empty hearth and a forsaken altar? I pictured the eagerness with which she would enter the village, recognising familiar objects one by one as she had recognised the cathedral apse at Nantes. To bring her thus abruptly face to face with the ruins of her home and the stain on her name would be like taking the hand of a child and, while listening to his prattle about longed-for toys and flowers, to lead him into a darkened house of death.

But the horses, fresh after a day's idleness, were stamping and champing. Lethe appeared in the doorway; and I knew there could be no



VIRGINIE

turning back. My frail, brave Virginie must needs pass through this cruellest of all her ordeals. But I vowed that, if there were any goodness and justice in heaven, to-day's ordeal should be the last.

As the innkeeper went indoors for an extra cushion, the ostler, who was to drive us, nudged my arm. He had been listening to his patron's remarks.

'Monsieur de Méricourt is a fine man,' he said, with a pronunciation so barbarous that his tones and grimaces told me as much as his words. 'If he likes a glass once in awhile . . . what then? One can't be all one's life in church. Zut! He's well enough. Didn't he give me this?'

He shewed me a whip, with a silver-mounted handle, of a fineness to which the ostler as a whole failed to live up. But, before I had time to ask him a question, the innkeeper returned and I handed Lethe into the poor carriage.

We got off at a good pace along a garish road planted with ugly telegraph-poles which carried two or three black wires to a blindingly white lighthouse. No rain had fallen for days, and the dust and sun were well-nigh intolerable. After ten minutes, however, we turned off to the left and began jolting through a forest of pines, something like the pines which surrounded Canuto's ruined tower, but older and more grandly grown. In their high and sombre tops a few stray breaths of wind spoke faintly, like old echoes lingering in the timbered roof of a vast and hoary church.

THE MIST

As the shadow received us, Lethe gave a little shout of joy, and would have said some words; but I restrained her, laying my finger on my lips and warning her by a suspicious look at the broad back of the ostler as he sat on the box in front of us.

What to think I did not know. From experience, I was used to the jealousies and scandal-bearings of a petty country-side; and it was possible that the innkeeper's bitterness towards Lethe's father could be traced back to some encounter in which the great man had been in the right and the small one in the wrong. The French aristocracy had its faults; but so had the French bourgeoisie. Besides, although I liked the ostler's face and manner less than I liked his master's, there was direct testimony in Monsieur de Méricourt's favour. That he should have hob-nobbed with horsey underlings and made them gifts of silver-mounted whips was not to my taste; but this, like his weakness for wine and play, was at least a fault on the generous side. Indeed, with a leap of my heart, I went on to infer that such a man would be the last to deny me Lethe through excess of pride in his rank and blood.

We came to a carrefour where a narrower road, running east and west, cut across the north-and-south road which we had followed since we entered the forest. The driver turned the horses west and we shook along an ill-made track in the direction of the Atlantic. So sharply was



VIRGINIE

I reminded of the way to the ruined tower that I should have had a bad moment had I not noticed a sign-post at the carrefour which pointed to Pont-le-Duc, and declared that it was only four kilometres away.

About a mile further on, we reached a narrow clearing in the wood. It was filled by a tiny white-washed chapel, or oratory, a well roughly roofed with slabs of stone, and a startling Calvary in which the details of the Crucifixion, including the weeping women and a Roman soldier, were represented by wooden figures, realistically coloured and larger than life. Even the ostler, whom I had reckoned up as an anti-clerical, raised his hat as we passed.

Lethe clutched my arm. I thought it was the unexpectedness or the rude force of the figures which had frightened her; but she murmured in my ear:

'The Calvary . . . I remember. It was here that Justine brought me, one Good Friday. And she brought me one other day, when there was snow.'

I nodded to shew I had heard.

'Speak softly,' I said.

At the end of one short mile more we bumped past a lonely cottage, evidently a woodman's. I thought I saw two peering faces at the single window, but could not be sure.

'Look,' whispered Lethe again, more excitedly than before. 'That is Justine's cottage. I have been there ten, twenty . . . oh, ever so many

THE MIST

times. Justine gave me cakes, and honey, and goat's milk. They had three goats. And Justine's husband used to bring me birds' eggs, but I made him put them back. Once he brought me a baby squirrel; only it died.'

There was no need to silence her; for she sank of her own accord into a reverie about the baby squirrel. Soon the woods gave place to fields, and a bend in the road brought us within hail of a straggling hamlet.

'Pont-le-Duc, Monsieur!' cried the ostler, waving his silver-mounted whip. He could not have flourished it with a more triumphant air of achievement if he had been shewing me the North Pole.

I took Virginie's hand.

The hamlet spread itself over a low hill; and, as the horses dragged us up through the sand, we could hear and almost see the Atlantic, murmuring under a noon-day haze. On the highest acre of the hill stood a rugged little church in the midst of a green grave-yard. The few cottages and farmsteads were scattered about, without plan, between stray clumps of pines.

At the foot of the hill, on the south side, ran a shrunken rivulet which threaded the single arch of a grey, stunted bridge and then disappeared in a deep ravine overhung by crowding and stooping trees. One glance sufficed to prove that this was the ravine which Virginie had remembered while the swollen brook outside the bungalow was brawling and thundering.



VIRGINIE

Virginie saw the rivulet and the ravine as soon as I did. But, standing up in the carriage, I saw what Virginie did not see. Through a gap in the trees I won a glimpse of a great house — a château with slates about to rattle from the sharp blue cones of its tourelles, and with dirty grey walls which not even the strong sun could whiten. Through another gap I saw part of an unkempt garden. But the carriage moved on.

‘The innkeeper was right,’ I mused sadly, ‘and the ostler was wrong.’ But, as I remained standing and surveyed the coast, beginning with the dunes which separated Pont-le-Duc from the ocean and following them all the way on to the misty mouth of the Loire, it flashed upon me that I was in La Vendée — La Vendée which had drawn the sword upon the First Republic; La Vendée where the Terror, finding the guillotine too slow, had drowned its thousands of women and children by scuttling barges in the Loire; La Vendée which, hardly three months before Canuto first came to the bungalow, had thrilled me during the French elections by choosing Royalist deputies in arrondissement after arrondissement; La Vendée defending the faith; La Vendée voting for kings. I thought of the fratricidal hate still smouldering between the great-grandsons of the Terror’s drowners and the great-grandsons of the Terror’s drowned; and, for the first time, it occurred to me that perhaps the motive-power of Canuto’s villanies flowed from some political vendetta. More. I half



THE MIST

suspected that the innkeeper's loathing of de Méricourt and the collapse of the de Méricourt fortunes might both be explained by de Méricourt's haughty loyalty to a hated and ruined cause. All that I had read about the peasant wars rushed back to my mind; and I remembered, with a sudden tightening of my heart-strings, that the cry, the screech-owl cry, with which Nicolo and Canuto had hailed one another in the woods around the ruined tower, was also the war-whoop and the pass-word of the foolish, faithful Chouans who had drenched the fields of Brittany with their blood.

CHAPTER V

THE horses came to a halt outside a wretched tavern, rudely daubed in faded letters, nearly two feet high, with the words, 'Grand-Café-Restaurant de l'Océan Atlantique.' From its fusty depths emerged a stolid old woman, heralded by a flying advance-guard of fowls which she drove clucking and plunging before her out into the road. If she felt any curiosity as to ourselves or our business, she kept it to herself, and awaited our commands.

Although a good deal might turn upon his sobriety, there was no denying the ostler his dose of a cloudy white spirit, which he tossed off neat. But, weary and thirsty as we were, neither Lethe nor I took the risk of cooling our tongues with liquids from a strange hand, which, for all we knew, had been tickled with a few of Canuto's five-franc pieces.

'Without doubt Monsieur and Madame will visit the church,' said the ostler.

The church stood about five hundred yards away, to the west; but he pointed with his whip-handle to a footpath opposite, which cut through a parched pasture thick with limp and dusty

THE MIST

dandelions. A few paces from the spot where the path branched off I saw a square stuccoed house of some pretensions, and I knew by the torn and sun-bleached placards which disfigured the walls that it was the Mairie. I noted it well, for, if Canuto should shew his face, it was my fixed resolve to pull everything down about his ears. If necessary, I would demand that the wire should flash my story to the high and mighty Prefect at Nantes, or even to Paris itself; and I believed that the mere strangeness of the affair would stir up the law to execute justice.

Viewed from afar, the church did not seem to be worth five yards' walk, much less five hundred. But I knew that Lethe would wish to visit it. Again, it was imperative that we should turn aside somewhere for a council of war. Neither the ostler nor the old woman could be allowed to blab out in Lethe's hearing any bad news or scandal. So we descended from the carriage and took the path to the church.

Although the Atlantic was so near, the air was lifeless, and the hazy noon-day heat was like a fiery vapour. We toiled up the shadeless bank, hardly exchanging two words until we paused at a wooden gate in the shadow cast by the chancel of the church. It was locked.

'The proper gate is at the other end of the churchyard,' explained Lethe, quite as a matter of course. 'Look. You can see it.'

I looked over the graves, and saw through the haze a large, plain gate in the western wall of



VIRGINIE

the churchyard. I guessed that it opened into the cart-road from the village.

'We'll climb over,' I said. And a moment later I was lifting her down.

We walked slowly along the strip of cool shadow under the north wall, and gained the west door. It was wide open, and we entered. Lethe knelt on the floor.

The church was plain and poor, without aisles or transept. If there had ever been mouldings or carvings in the short, wide nave, they were so completely hidden under coats of whitewash that there was nothing by which a stranger could guess the building's date. With the round-headed windows in its thick walls, it might have been a time-worn work of the eleventh century, or, on the other hand, it might have been a rude and weather-beaten shell not more than three generations old. By contrast, the stone-vaulted chancel was ornate. But, at a second glance, I saw that the single stained-glass window was cheap, and that the vases and images on the altars and cornices were old and mean. If the principal parishioner, the *Sieur de Méricourt*, were rich, evidently he was not pious; or, if he were pious, evidently he was not rich. Nevertheless, the church was airy and clean; and the priest, whoever he might be, who served it in the dead *curé's* place, was clearly doing his best.

I was beginning to puzzle out the next step in our campaign, when Lethe touched my arm.

'Why won't you pray?' she said.



THE MIST

She was paler than the wan wall beside her, and, as I watched her, she began to tremble all over. She tried to steady herself by grasping the rail of a chair, but her hands shook like dead leaves on a tree.

Despite her fits of abstraction in the train, she had passed, until this moment, through the stages of her home-coming with a vague and irresponsible air, which would have pained me had I not seen herself and all her deeds and states through an incense-smoke of pity and love. But, as she knelt white and shivering on the stone floor, it was plain that all the nameless forebodings which had been haunting my own mind throughout the eight-and-twenty hours since we left Brattle had suddenly gathered themselves up for Lethe in one torturing horror, even as the electricity which has been lingering about a forest all night and all day gathers itself up at last into forked flashes of lightning, slashing and stabbing and darting like swords and spears and javelins. She had not heard the inn-keeper's words. She had not seen the tumbling roofs of her old home. But unutterable fear was probing and searing her heart as with a dagger of white-hot steel, and she cried again, in a low desperate wail:

'Why won't you pray?'

I faced her, excuseless. I could not deceive her by a mere closing of eyes or bowing of head. Yet how was I to pray? Even after the moments of sympathy with her faith which I had experienced while I knelt beside her in the Westhamp-



VIRGINIE

ton church, and again while we stood together on our second Sunday evening by the hall window, and, strangest of all, when I found beneath my pillow her little cross, the utmost I could say was that I no longer disbelieved. It was true that, in the black postern-chamber of the ruined tower, and again by the pool-side on the dawn-flushed moor, my drugged and drowsy wits had been glad to repose in the thought that there must be some kind of supernal justice which would ultimately thwart villany, and some kind of supernal pity which would watch over faithful love. It was true, also, that in my last mad crash against the gate which barred me from Lethe's flame-girt bier I had invoked the name of Lethe's God; but I had uttered it more as a proud battle-cry than as a believing prayer.

I looked away awkwardly. First, I glanced at the crudely tricked-out altar, and at the gaudy trappings of a plaster saint above it. Then I turned and had a glimpse of the churchyard through the low-arched doorway. The mist was growing denser, and not a leaf of a tree stirred. Last of all, I faced Lethe once more. Her white cheeks and pleading eyes would not be denied, and I let myself go, and prayed. Standing bolt upright, with unclosed eyes and unmoving lips, in a surge of prayer without words, I challenged God to prove his existence and his power. I challenged him to fence us round with walls and towers throughout the coming fight, and to launch fire and sword and hailstones against all

THE MIST

who would drag us apart. A mocking voice within bade me stifle such blasphemies, and cease insulting Heaven with my selfish, earthly desires; but its taunt was drowned in a rush of certainty that to guard and cherish Lethe was the godliest work of my life. Then, in contrast with her brightness, the dark devilishness of Canuto bulked up in my mind, and I began to pray that Canuto might be struck down straightway to his native hell before he could raise his little finger to threaten my Lethe with another feather's weight of harm. But I could not finish. My blaze of hate went out as suddenly as the snaky flames round Lethe's pyre in the ruins. The conviction that Canuto must be fearlessly met and ruthlessly vanquished, and for ever disarmed, and even fully punished, became clearer than ever, but mere vengefulness died out of my heart. And, when I knew that vengeful hate was dead, on a sudden I knew that I had prayed.

Virginie knew it too. For, although we were in the church, she rose up and laid her hand in mine.

Without a word we turned and sought the outer air. By this time the Atlantic was completely shrouded in white mist, which blunted the angles of even the tavern and the Mairie only a quarter of a mile distant across the fields. Sounds as well as sights were muffled, and the little graveyard was more than ever a city of the dead. Hand in hand we moved slowly down the principal way from the church door to the grave-



VIRGINIE

yard gate. Most of the tombs were poor. Inscribed stones were few, and roughly-painted boards were many, while here and there were nameless mounds, slowly settling down to the ancient level of the field. There seemed to be only two tombs of importance — a fluted column, broken at a height of about four feet from the ground, to signify untimely death, and, just beyond the column, a cubical building of weather-stained stone. In such lowly surroundings this great family vault looked harsh and overbearing. It measured about twelve feet every way, and was built in a pagan style which refused to brook even the unanswerable reproof of death. I guessed that it was the resting-place of the de Méricourts, and, holding her hand more firmly, I planned to lead Virginie past it and away.

But she had seen it already. And, although her hand trembled in mine, she quickened her step and drew me into the neglected path which led to both the vault and the fluted column. At the column she stopped.

‘It is my mother’s grave,’ she said softly, making the sign of faith and hope.

It puzzled me that Lethe’s mother had not been laid in the vault, and the tomb itself offered no clue. If there were inscriptions, they must have been on the hidden side of the plinth, for the mossy faces towards the path had never been incised. Still, I uncovered my head, and joined myself in spirit to Lethe’s prayers. But while I tried to lift my heart to heaven, it was necessary

THE MIST

that my eyes should still range the earth; and they did not range the earth in vain.

The door of the vault was open.

My heart leapt. I knew that I was on the brink of the secret at last. Perhaps the weirdly brooding mist worked upon my hunger and thirst and weariness to sharpen my senses, but, in some way or other, I was certain that the little pagan temple before me was the shrine from which the oracle would speak. And now that the moment had come, for Virginie's sake I shrank back from the rending veil.

Not waiting for her to pray out her prayers, I bent to her ear and asked eagerly, in the hope that light would come, after all, from within, so that we should need no longer to seek it from without:

'Has it come back?'

She looked up bewildered.

'Has it come back?' I repeated. 'At Nantes, outside the cathedral, you remembered. You knew the short cut back to the hotel. You remembered the Calvary in the forest. You remembered Justine, and her husband, and the goats, and the squirrel. You remembered . . . this grave. Has it all come back — the rest of your life . . . the secret?'

Her eyes filled with tears, and she shook her head. In the old way, she raised her free hand to her forehead.

'No,' I pleaded. 'If it has not come back . . . let it alone.'



VIRGINIE

‘It has not come back,’ she said, in anguish. ‘As each old spot comes under my eyes, I know it, but . . . No, no, I can’t remember!’

I began to comfort her, but she broke out almost gaily:

‘What does it matter? We are going to them, aren’t we? You’ll take them to me now, won’t you? This place makes me sad. I want to go home. Then they’ll tell us everything.’

She cast my hand away, and started impetuously forward. But I clasped her wrist lightly, and kept her at my side until we stood on a broad slab of stone at the threshold of the vault. Our eyes met, and, without a word, we entered.

Against the furthest wall, in the line of the door, we saw a stone altar, incongruous with the architecture of the vault, and boldly carved in the manner of the fifteenth century. Under our feet were two monumental brasses, English in style; and on our right was a recumbent effigy of a knight, in alabaster, which, like the altar and the brasses, appeared to have been brought from an older building. The dark floor and walls were relieved by many inlaid white marble tablets, lettered with the names of the dead. My eyes and brain, preternaturally alert, took in these details at a glance. But I did not linger over them for more than a moment, and Virginie did not look at them at all. She was crouching against me and staring at something against the left-hand wall.

I followed her rapt gaze, and saw, in the north-

THE MIST

east angle of the chamber, close up to the altar, a new tomb. So new it was that the tools of the workmen who had fixed it in its place still lay in a bag of braided straw on the ground. I concluded at once that the work was unfinished, that the masons had merely gone home for their mid-day meal, and that the open door was accordingly explained. But whose tomb could it be? The odd speech of the inn-keeper resounded in my ears: 'The de Méricourts only come to Pontle-Duc now-a-days to be buried.'

Like the old monument of the alabaster knight opposite, this new tomb was a low sarcophagus with a recumbent figure on the lid. The figure, rather summarily carved in Caen stone, represented a young girl, with one hand on her heart and the other drooping listlessly out of sight into the deep shadow between her body and the grim wall. The face appeared to be the conventional work of a journeyman sculptor, and not a portrait; but it was hard to trace the features under the flowers which half covered the statue from heel to crown. A rope of laurel leaves was bound round the lower edge of the slab or lid on which the figure rested. Upon the maid's breast lay lilies; the hand on her heart held a red rose, unwithered in so cold a clasp; more lilies were heaped about her white feet; and her brow was wreathed with a garland of bay-leaves and poppies.

At the sight of the poppies, I knew that my hour was indeed about to strike. Beyond a doubt their insolent scarlet was the livery of



VIRGINIE

Canuto's outriders and challengers, and I half turned towards the doorway to greet the foe in person. But Virginie's hand tightened on mine like a vice, and she huddled against me in anguish and terror.

'She . . . this grave . . . who is it?' she moaned. And when I could not think of an answer, she broke out wildly, 'It is my sister! I know, I know, I know! It is my sister!'

Before I could discover whether a new wave of memory had indeed borne the image of a beloved and forgotten sister back into her mind, she leapt from me and mounted the single step or ledge by which the sarcophagus was surrounded. In an instant I was at her side, and at the same moment we both started at the sight of something long and bright and slender shining in the gulf of shadow between the statue and the wall.

'It is the silver trumpet,' cried Virginie, whiter than the stone.

'It cannot be,' I answered, with some blundering thought of ending her fears. 'It is another one — a copy — a silver trumpet like it.'

In a twinkling she had snatched the trumpet from the stone-maiden's hand, and, without a word, she held close to my eyes the crumple in the silver where it had struck the floor of the hall at Brattle. But, before either of us could utter a word, we recoiled, for a rustling, slithering sound came from the lid of the sarcophagus.

The girdle of laurel leaves had broken away from one corner of the slab, and still clinging to



THE MIST

the other, trailed heavily to the floor. Its fall disclosed an inscription running along the rim of the sarcophagus, and in letters of glossy black gun-metal inlaid in the white stone, we read:—

VIRGINIE LOUISE DE MÉRICOURT. R.I.P.



CHAPTER VI

As I bent over swooning Lethe, and sought to revive her by pressing the cool silver against her cheek and sprinkling her forehead with the precious little hoards of dew which still lay hidden in the deep chalices of the lilies, I knew whose shadow must shortly fill the narrow doorway and shut out half the misty light. But I waited him calmly — even more calmly than I had awaited his words in the inky darkness of the ruined tower.

I did not try to work out the meanings of what had happened. Vague thoughts defiled through the back of my mind, and confused voices murmured faintly. The first voice seemed to say that Canuto had merely played the simplest of hoaxes by sending us on a fool's errand, and that Lethe had nothing to do either with the family of de Méricourt or with the commune of Pont-le-Duc. But another voice promptly retorted that she had recognised the Calvary, the woodman's cottage, the fluted column, and the churchyard gate. A third voice spoke sorrowfully of sudden death, and hinted at some sweet sister, a sister named Virginie, to whom the little

THE MIST

prayer-book had truly belonged, a sister broken-hearted through her father's ruin and Lethe's flight. A fourth voice croaked grimly of murder to come, and began to declare that the new tomb was empty and ready and waiting for the victim whose proper name it bore, and that the mason's tools were the madman Canuto's who had lured us easily to be buried alive in the ancestral grave. But I hardly listened to its warning. The conviction that we had come to the beginning of the end, and that no prudence or energy of mine could warp the course of fate, was so complete that I sought neither to explain the near past nor to peruse the near future.

I laid Lethe down tenderly upon the low stone ledge, propping her shoulders against the corner of the sarcophagus, and pillowing her head in a cushion of bunched and coiled laurel. Before the task was done, a tread of feet on the stone door-sill awoke the echoes of the vault, and the ghostly twilight deepened. I knew that our hour had struck, and I could not feel the lightest thrill of surprise. The marvel would have been if Canuto had not come, or even if he had delayed for a few minutes his coming. But, until Lethe's breathing assured me that her wonderful vitality could be trusted to bring her round, I did not look up.

When at length I faced Canuto he was standing in an easy attitude full in the centre of the entrance and gripping the door-posts with his small, white hands, so that his arms and body



VIRGINIE

made a cruciform barrier against any attempt to break past. He wore a suit of white flannel, relieved by thin vertical lines of deep blue, with a loose-collared shirt of the same pattern. The face under his broad-brimmed hat of white linen was clean shaven, except for a moustache of jetty black, touched here and there with grey. This was the first time that I had had both the will and the power to gaze at him from top to toe; for at Westhampton I had been insufficiently concerned, in the wheat-field the hedge flowers had broken my view, and by the road-side on the hill-top the light had been weak and my glimpse of him only fleeting. But, as he raised himself on his toes, supporting all his weight with his hands, and swaying slightly inwards through the door, I saw that I was confronting a finely-bred, finely-trained, finely-preserved, handsome, courtly man in the prime of life. The many times when I had promised myself a swift and easy triumph so soon as I should pit my young strength against his cunning recurred to my mind, and I saw that I could no more beat him in single combat than a wave of a summer sea could smash the steel bows of a battleship. Whatever he set his mind and hand to do, this man could do it.

But what had he come to do at Pont-le-Duc? I tried in vain to read the answer in his face. All traces of the airy gaiety which had spiced and salted our breakfast at Westhampton were gone, and I could see at a glance that he had not come to tease and chaff me as in the ruined tower.

THE MIST

Nor could I detect any lurking spark of madness in his eye. Of all the expressions which I had seen on his face at our three encounters, his look as he poised himself quietly in the doorway reminded me most of the sad fondness with which he had gazed upon Lethe in her deck-chair beside the ruffled corn. I glanced down at Lethe's still drooping lids and faintly reddening cheeks, and dimly wondered what I could do when she should open her eyes and see her enemy hardly three yards away.

He spoke first.

'I knew I should find you here,' he said.

I answered, as drily and curtly as he:

'And I knew that you would follow.'

During the pause which ensued I met his quiet gaze with all the scorn and defiance that I could force to my eyes and lips. But in return I moved him to no more than a slight and almost kindly smile. To bring things to a head before Lethe should awaken, I advanced a couple of steps, and said in low tones:

'This is the third time we have met face to face. It shall be the last.'

'As you please,' he answered simply. 'Let it be the last.'

His expression was as inscrutable as ever. At his words Lethe moaned lightly. I stepped swiftly back, and raised her from her hard couch until she stood upright beside me, encircled by my arm. For one fiery moment I endured an agony of fear lest this new shock of Canuto's



VIRGINIE

presence should smite upon her shattered spirit and tortured heart too swiftly and cruelly to be borne. But when she opened her eyes, instead of a scream of terror, she gave a soft little cry and moved frankly towards him, just as she had done when he broke through the wheat. It was only my sharp start of anger and despair which arrested her, driving away some earlier memory, and reminding her that he was her foe and mine. She shrank back against me, and I faced Canuto proudly, with my arm tightening its clasp of my bride's waist. But, instead of taking up the challenge, he dropped his hands to his sides and looked at Virginie long and tenderly.

'This is the last time,' I repeated sternly, though my heart told me that the words were mere sound reverberating over the hollow emptiness of my witlessness and powerlessness.

'So you said,' he replied softly, with his mild smile.

'This time,' I hurled back, 'we shall make an end. Whatever your infernal game may be with this poor child, you shall play it no more. Whether you're a madman amusing yourself with tomfoolery, or a scoundrel playing these hellish tricks to extort money or to hide a crime, doesn't much matter. To-day shall be the end.'

Even while I was speaking I knew that I was merely lashing myself up into frothy bravado. Besides, I felt in my soul that I was profanely wrenching myself loose from the conviction which had been vouchsafed to me after Lethe's swoon —

THE MIST

the conviction that I must await in coolness and calmness an end which would come in its own way. But Canuto took me at my word.

'You mean, Lionel Barrison,' he said, with something of his old sarcastic manner, 'that to-day there's to be an end . . . to Me! You mean you're going to shoot. Don't do it. It's vulgar. Also, there's no need. We've left Old England. We are in beautiful France. We are in a land of words, not deeds. We are under the free and glorious Republic. Let to-day be the end of our affair, by all means. But why not let it end, Frenchwise, in talk?'

I watched him narrowly. Taught by the past, I fancied that this was the moment he would choose for filling the vault with drowsy vapours, or for flinging us back and slamming the door in our faces, or for some new devilment we had never dreamed of. Instinctively I glanced beyond him into the mist, expecting to see the shaggy bulk of Nicolo. But he read my thoughts, and spoke on quickly.

'Lionel Barrison,' he said, 'don't shoot me. It would be foolish. When I am shot I shall be a dead man, and dead men tell no tales. Yet my tale is the very tale you have come six hundred miles to hear. Therefore, don't shoot; or hear the tale first, and do the shooting afterwards.'

He saw how his speech went home.

'To do you justice, Lionel Barrison,' he continued, 'I honestly think you wouldn't really



VIRGINIE

wish to shoot me, except by way of forestalling me in shooting . . . you! Let us have a friendly understanding. This flannel suit has two pockets. Look. I turn them both inside out. Mark the haul. One spotted handkerchief, one watch, one twenty-franc piece, one bad cigar. No pistol. No chemicals. Nothing else whatever. Stay! The key of the vault! I give it you to keep till we have done. I have brought no weapon deadlier than my tongue. Lionel Barrison, I repeat: Why not end our business Frenchwise, in mere talk?’

I took the key, but as I could not trust him, I did not answer. At my hesitation he flushed proudly, then, controlling himself, he waved his hand over the graves and added, in simple tones, from which all sarcasm and levity had gone:

‘Hark! We are in the midst of God’s acre. Even a scoundrel respects the dead. By the sacred memory of all who are lying here, I give you my word of honour that neither of you need fear more harm or trouble from me or mine.’

His bantering had been in English, but this solemn avowal he made in French. At the sound of her own language Lethe strained forward to listen.

‘Tell me,’ I demanded at a venture, drawing her back to me, and looking her in the eyes, ‘who is that man standing in the doorway?’

She hesitated, and I thought she was on the point of grasping the clue. But it slipped from her as Canuto struck in sharply and masterfully:



THE MIST

'Leave Virginie alone. When the time comes for pronouncing the name of "that man standing in the doorway" you may be sure "that man" will pronounce it himself. We are wasting time. I am going to tell you what you have come to France to know. I'll cut it short, but it's a long tale. Sit down. Both of you. There, on that ledge.'

The meagre wavelet of my resentment at his dictatorial tone, and of chagrin at his ordering me about before Lethe, spent itself almost as soon as it arose. He was the man; I was the boy. He seemed to be all spirit; I seemed to be all hands and feet. We sat down, Lethe and I, on the long stone ledge. But there was one point on which I, the boy, was still resolved to fight him, the man, to the bitterest end. He should not take Lethe away from me so long as I was alive. So I kept my arm about her waist.



CHAPTER VII

'VIRGINIE remembers that the broken column, where she paused, before you came in here, marks her mother's grave,' began Canuto, leaning lightly against the further door-post, and speaking in French. 'I was watching you, and I saw that she remembered. But she does not remember why her mother was laid to rest outside instead of inside the vault. How can she? One cannot remember what one never knew.

'My poor Virginie, be brave and listen. Your mother was Blanche Marie Thérèse de la Freyne, great grand-daughter of the Marquis de la Freyne, who died for the King at Quiberon. I knew her well. We were boy and girl together. In face and form you are her image, but she was graver-minded than you, and less light-hearted.

'When she was nineteen, a cur of a student, who was meeting her secretly, shewed himself in love with her; and she loved him in return with all her poor heart. Nay, Virginie, hold up your head. Don't be afraid. There was no scandal, no disgrace. Cur and coward though he was, he was not such a cur as . . . that. But, when she loved him better than her life; and when, so

THE MIST

far as such a creature could love anybody, he loved her too; and when she was willing and eager to sacrifice everything for his sake, and to share his poverty in simple happiness; the creature was too lean, too mean, too suspicious to take her at her word. Fate offered him a life of sweet romance with an angel, but he was a coward, and turned away. He believed she was a self-deluded chit, made of the same poor stuff as himself, and that after a month or two of honey their life would be wormwood and gall because of her peevish repinings after lost luxuries and pomps. He flattered himself that there was an old head on his young shoulders, and, instead of listening to her voice and to his own heart, he bowed down before a pack of cynical lies about the brittleness of love and the fickleness of woman. No. I am doing him no injustice. I knew them both. Their meetings were secret, but I knew all about it at the time. To be brief, the student went back to Paris, full of some plausible resolve to thrust love from his mind until he could come back with a name and a fortune. He went away without vows. He did not even ask her to plight her troth to him, because some petty maxim of his bloodless worldly-wisdom assured him that it "wouldn't be fair." He went away. And it broke her heart.

'Lionel Barrison, we should give even the devil his due. I say again that the creature was a cur; but I am going to be as fair to a cur as I hope you will be even to a scoundrel like me. The



VIRGINIE

creature kept his word. In a flashy sort of way he was clever. He worked like a nigger, and had a stroke of luck as well. Within a year he made some discovery or other which set France talking and brought him money. Then he came back . . . and found that he was a week too late. Against her will, Blanche de la Freyne had become Madame de Méricourt. I know all about it, and I know that if he had stolen to her window even on the wedding morning she would have flown with him — she who was softer than a dove — on wings as bold as an eagle's, to the ends of the earth.

He paused and looked vacantly into the mist.

When he began to speak again it was in a lower and tenderer tone.

'My poor Virginie,' he said, 'I am forced to hurt you. I am going to speak of your father. Do not be angry. You do not remember, but he never willingly spent an hour in your presence in his life. Lionel Barrison, you have found Virginie as good as gold. Honour her for her goodness — and thank God, too: because Virginie's father was not a good man. Perhaps it was not his fault. The dead are sacred, and we are in the presence of their dust; but the country people say that you must go back to the times of that old alabaster knight in the corner to find a de Méricourt who cared a straw for God or devil. It's true, or it isn't. But Blanche's husband was no good. He wooed her on false pretences, and hoodwinked her friends. Young

THE MIST

and beautiful though she was, he desired nothing beyond the run of a new lot of money. He was cruel and sneering to her from the first hour of the marriage; and, although I did not know it till years afterwards, at times he even treated her with violence.'

I saw him clench his fists, and I felt Lethe's trembling.

'But what about the student?' I asked, so as to end a pause which was full of anguish for them both. 'When he found out she was unhappy, what did he do?'

'The student?' echoed Canuto, with a great gesture of contempt. 'What did he do? He did what you might have expected. He did . . . nothing! Not that it could have made much difference. If he had tried to take her away she would have refused. To run away an hour before marriage and to run away the day after are two different things. But I tell you he was a cur and a coward. He didn't try. He didn't even enquire whether she was in the seventh heaven or in the dregs of the hundredth hell. The student went back to Paris.'

He stopped abruptly and gazed again into the mist before he added:

'What it was in Blanche that drove her husband to hate the very sight of her I don't know — unless it was that her goodness was a perpetual rebuke to his viciousness. The fact remains that, after a week or two, her mere presence seemed to infuriate him; and, after she



VIRGINIE

was gone, the sight of Virginie, his own child, always maddened him into the same brute madness. Among his boon companions, most of them chosen from the hangers-on of stables and inns, he was the soul of weak benevolence and unjust generosity. To strangers who pleased his fancy he was jovial and free; but to his wife, and to her child after her, Gaston de Méricourt was a —,

He bit off the tail of the sentence before it could sting Lethe's ear, and kept it to himself. Then, regaining his tender tone, he started afresh.

'Virginie,' he said, 'yesterday was your birthday. When you were ten weeks old your mother died. She had been born for a sweet nest of love, and she died caught in a thorn-brake of hate. Hate followed her even to the grave. Gaston de Méricourt denied her a few square feet of shelter in this vault where you are sitting. I must tell you the truth. It was not his hand which raised this broken pillar to the memory of her broken life. They buried her here one drizzling day of late October, with none to shed tears save the pitiful sky.' And, turning to me, Canuto added quickly in English: 'There was no priest. He struck the curé with the butt of his whip. The villagers who came with flowers he drove away, cursing them to hell. He was mad with brandy. He and the gravedigger and the undertaker's men from St. Nazaire kept up their orgie all night.'

THE MIST

I hardly heard him. My thoughts were with Virginie, my stricken Virginie, reeling under blow after blow. Her cheek was once more stone-white and her hand stone-cold. She seemed as rigid as marble, and I feared that she would die. But, not a moment too soon, the tense cord which bound her heart snapped, and she burst into a flood of tears.

Canuto sprang towards her with outstretched arms to take her to his breast.

‘Stand back!’ I shouted, springing in his path.

He faced me, astounded, and I fully believed that in half a second we should be at grips in a fight to the death. His cheek blazed with contemptuous anger. But, by a huge effort, he mastered himself. The blaze died down. For a moment he held his ground, gazing at my sob-riven Lethe’s tear-drenched cheeks with unutterable sadness. Then he bowed to me with courtly grace, and stepped back to the doorway.

Regardless of his presence, I drew Lethe’s head against my shoulder, and held her softly to me, and did all I could to comfort her. When I glanced up, he had turned his back upon us and was once more staring into the mist.

‘You are good to me,’ sobbed Lethe at length. ‘But why is the world so cruel?’ And, when I sought to console her further, she dashed the tears from her long lashes with her cold little hand, and struggled out of my clasp. ‘No, no!’ she cried. ‘Let me alone. I must hear it all—



VIRGINIE

every word — at once. Tell him to go on. I promise not to cry any more.'

We sat side by side, and she would not suffer me so much as to hold her hand as Canuto began to speak again, with averted eyes.

'There would have been at least one mourner,' he said, 'but I heard of neither death nor funeral till November. Her nearest friends did not know till she had been laid in the ground. Besides, I had never set foot in Pont-le-Duc, nor had I set eyes upon her since the marriage. At that time I had never met de Méricourt. I first saw this village early in November, one bright, warm afternoon. De Méricourt was in Orléans. I went to the house. When one of the servants heard my name, she made a sign with her hand, and while I was on my way back to the inn, she slipped after me and gave me a letter. It was from Virginie's mother. When I die the letter shall be Virginie's. Till then . . . it is mine.'

He spoke the last words more to himself than to us, breathing them so softly that they seemed to float away, and disappear like bubbles in the mist.

'It was a letter,' he continued, 'on two points. First, Virginie's mother loved her first and only lover to the end. She fondly believed that unkindly fate, and not his own ignobility, had torn their lives apart. She trusted him to the last, though he had given no sign. The second point was — Virginie. Her mother laid upon me, with all the solemnity of a soul near death, the



THE MIST

care of Virginie. Most of all, she enjoined that Virginie must not marry save where she would love and be loved.'

We waited for the sequel.

'Lionel Barrison,' he said, turning on me swiftly, and speaking with ringing irony, 'that poor woman did not know I was a scoundrel. She thought I was a man of honour and her friend. Therefore it was to me, scoundrelly me, that she confided her mystical, beautiful thought. She laid up the treasure in an earthen vessel. Will you let me try and tell you what her thought was?'

He paused until I said 'Go on.'

'I have pondered it often these nineteen long years,' he said, 'and I think that her thought was this. Nay, I do not think; I am certain. It isn't for nothing that I once knew her mind through and through.'

'Lionel Barrison, they say that it is love which makes the world go round. To others that saying was only a pretty proverb; to Virginie's mother it was an article of faith. Consider it well. Take it into the heart of your heart, till it is no longer a mere string of jingling words, but a truth all warm and alive. Every moment of Virginie's mother's life was a living out of that creed. Not that she put it into words, or was conscious of it as an explicit doctrine. Like Virginie's, her soul always outran her mind.'

'That Virginie's mother died, as I know she

turned; and then to see the cup of joy
away that she might drink deep of such
poison as de Méricourt's . . . Lions
explain to me why she did not die de
God is Hate. Remember, she did
what I know and what I have told
She did not know that it was her love
and baseness which had wrecked her
thought it was the act of God, or of
Providence, or whatever you like to
she died believing.

'But, deep in her heart, she sorrowed
that through the wreck of her life she
been cheated of a precious freight she
knew, her soul knew, that this wheel
grinds wearily, creaking and labouring
water-wheel in drought, and that even
of love springing from happy heart
mill stream. Her soul knew that even
pure love goes to brighten the dull
old stars. And she knew that whenever
fail of love, they have failed to play
place appointed, leaving the spot to
with nettles and thorns. "Let Virg



THE MIST

until his tones wore down to silence. But he came to himself with a rush.

'Your pardon, Mr. Lionel Barrison,' he said briskly and coldly. 'I oughtn't to try and do our bit of business in the language of lyric poets. What it all amounts to is this. The voice of Virginie's mother, commanding me from the other side of death, laid on me this charge. And, although I say it who shouldn't, I have done my best. Even scoundrels have redeeming traits.

'Not that it was easy work. If de Méricourt had suspected my rôle, his insane fury and jealousy would have hounded little Virginie to join her poor mother. I had to be as cunning as a fox, and as patient and laborious as a million generations of coral insects.

'I tried to work at first through an aunt of Virginie's — her mother's maiden sister. She was a good woman, and may God rest her soul. But we were soon at war. One day she let out that her dearest wish was to see her niece grow up and enter a convent. I dissented, and we quarrelled.

'Lionel Barrison, don't misunderstand me. I am no anti-clerical. I am a Vendéan. Whatever you may think in England, our nuns were the salt of France. I am not speaking only of the working sisters who nursed the sick and fed the poor and taught the young. I am thinking of those whom you would call an unproductive class, idling away their time in barren piety and excessive prayer. I believe these were the women



VIRGINIE

who redressed the balance of France in a shallow and selfish and vicious time. But God is worshipped in many ways. To force into human marriage a maiden whom God has called to be a nun would be a sacrilege, an impious theft of God's own. But to force into the cloister a woman who is called to brighten and invigorate the world with one more vital ray of the highest and sweetest human love . . . is not that also a sacrilege, an impiety? God is worshipped, I say, in many ways. The words in the breviary are not the only divine office rising up before him like scented smoke every day and every hour. Nor did I dissent from the idea of a convent out of my own obstinacy or private opinion. You understand? Virginie was my ward, to be surrendered to no one save a worthy and beloved lover.

'My trusty helper was found in the person of the servant who had given me the letter. Virginie, you owe more to her than to anyone else in the world. She it was who tended you when the hireling nurse left you for hours alone, even in your little sicknesses. Thank God, France is still full of good women. Without Justine, your baby sorrows must have broken your heart. And it was she who contrived for you your simple joys — she, the only mother you had.

'Your father was seldom at home; indeed, never, save when funds were exhausted. But one summer he returned, and your torments began. It was then that, very discreetly, I made his



THE MIST

acquaintance, drinking and playing at the old house. But I kept the secret. So far was I from letting it out, that I used to complain fretfully of your childish romping, until I managed him into sending you to school. At first he was bent on sending you to a school taught by laics, where they were not content to leave religion unmentioned, but openly taught that it was obsolete superstition; and it was only by a trick that I got you placed with some teaching nuns at Nantes. You remained at Nantes till a few weeks ago. I saw you seldom; your father never; and Justine only when I secretly planned for you to come home during Monsieur de Méricourt's absences from France. Meanwhile I was preparing for the day when your father should suddenly bethink himself of mending his fortunes by disposing of you in marriage. So as to have influence with him, I cultivated his friendship in every way.'

Canuto ceased speaking in French, and added, shortly and carelessly, in English:

'In other words, a good many times I lent him a good deal of money.'



CHAPTER VIII

‘You think I’m a long time coming to the point, Lionel Barrison,’ Canuto continued. ‘So I am. To cram the story of nineteen years into about nineteen minutes isn’t easy. But be comforted. We are near the end.’

‘I ought to have said that it is over three years since Virginie last saw the old house. Even her holidays since then have been spent at the convent, for, just three years and six weeks ago, the house caught fire. The ancient rooms looking towards the sea were burnt out, and the modern front was so much damaged that it is falling into ruin.’

Changing once more from French to English, and speaking in a careless tone, so that Virginie should believe he was merely making some trivial explanation, he glanced at me and added:

‘It was St. John’s Eve — your English Midsummer. There are spots in Brittany where paganism crawls out of its hole on that night and lifts its obscene head. Fires are lighted on moorland altars, and the devil comes back to his own. Speaking generally, these unholy rites are almost dead. Certainly they have been dead for five



THE MIST

hundred years at Pont-le-Duc. But Gaston de Méricourt, always changing his associates, fell in, three springs ago, with a gang of sham poets and painters in Paris. They were charlatans, every man of them — absinthe-soaked charlatans, the decoys of a shrewdly-managed *cabaret artistique* in an infamous street of Montmartre. De Méricourt played Maecenas; and it seems that one of the poets, the only brain in the gang, appealed to him in a Horatian ode to take his brother-poets away from the monotonous prudery of Paris, and to conduct them through a lurid show of primeval wickedness by the light of the mid-summer-night's fires in *The Wild West*. De Méricourt brought them here. And when he found that, after all, there were no spontaneous devilries to be seen, he and his crew put their wits to the devising of a Walpurgisnacht of their own. Lionel Barrison, I tell you that Nero and Helio-gabalus looked up from hell with envious eyes that night.'

Before I could speak, he raised his voice, and went on, in French:

'Yes. The château was burnt out. The few souvenirs of Virginie's mother were all destroyed, save one. Justine's husband saved the silver trumpet — the trumpet which called to glory and death at Quiberon; the trumpet which Richard de la Freyne, the crusader and the saint, brought back from the Holy Land; the trumpet which is said to be older than Solomon's temple, although its silver could not be purer or brighter if it had



VIRGINIE

been won but yesterday from a virgin mine; the trumpet which, they say, has been a never-failing talisman against dishonour. Justine's husband saved it. *Virginie, it is yours.*'

Words rose to Lethe's lips and to mine. But he silenced us by a look, and resumed his tale.

'The marriage. *Virginie's* marriage. Throughout last winter I was maturing my plans. I did not choose that *Virginie* should marry according to the customs of her own country. Never mind the reasons. They are too many, too obscure. To understand them you would have to understand France. I chose that she should marry an Englishman. Lionel Barrison . . . I chose *you*. Don't jump. And don't ask questions. But I will tell you one thing. I know how you have lived your life. You have always respected yourself, and therefore I could bring you *Virginie*.

'Not that I had intended to bring her frozen in a glass case. I was scheming on more humdrum lines, and, although de Méricourt hated the English, I felt confident of bringing to pass an ideal marriage. Lionel Barrison, I had studied you well. You are most decidedly not the handsomest, or the wisest, or the best man in the world; but you were the man of all men for *Virginie*.

'Lionel Barrison, for a moment I must speak of myself. Never mind my name, for the present. When I pronounce it, you will remember that you have heard it before. I am a physician. Not one of your house-to-house practitioners, working



THE MIST

harder for five francs than I do for a thousand. I am less useful, less self-sacrificing than such poor devils as those, and therefore I am a hundred times more wealthy and a thousand times more famous. I have a laboratory in Paris. I study drugs. I try to do quietly and professionally what the Germans and the Americans do commercially and noisily. But no more of that. The point is that, about a month ago, I finished the longest of all my experiments, and was free to think of Virginie.

'Save for a formal talk in the convent parlour twice or thrice a year I had not seen Virginie or spoken with her freely since the days when she had sat chattering on my knee in Justine's cottage. You have heard already that I was forced to work for her, so to speak, in the dark. If her father had heard that I was shewing interest in her and sympathy with her, his madman's jealousy would have blazed out into some fatal mischief. But when I went down to Nantes last month, I did so with a clear resolve to take Virginie entirely into my confidence. In the train I almost chose the words I would say.

'I reached the convent to find that Virginie was gone. The nun who had watched over her for a dozen years told me the news with tearful eyes. Only the night before, Monsieur de Méricourt had clamoured at the gate when everybody was in bed. Full of brandy, he had hurled threats at the portress, and had insisted on taking Virginie away there and then. The nun did not

saw it again at Brattle yesterday.

'Post-haste I raced from Nantes her le-Duc, or rather to Justine's cottage fell upon me with sobs and tears. She Pierre, her husband, had set out that v ing for Paris to find me and tell me although he had never in his life be further east than Angers.

'Her next words struck me dumb. and reckless in his friendships as in his Méricourt had suddenly struck up a marry Virginie off-hand to the newest c companions — to the sham Russian co real name is Sergius Duclos.

'Virginie, be brave. I am telling y things, but remember that the danger ever. Sergius Duclos was older than y He practised, as a master, every vice a save drunkenness. He had wedded already. The first, a Russian, left his within a week, and divorced him; the Frenchwoman, died broken-hearted w months. Sergius Duclos was not ev rich. In dark ways he possessed his



THE MIST

only two sentences more about Sergius Duclos. There are men in Paris who almost boast that they have lost the last remains of decency and honour, yet they would not have been seen with Sergius Duclos. Virginie, if you had looked up into the face of Sergius Duclos with a full understanding that you were in his power, you would have died before he could have harmed a hair of your head.

‘Justine told me that the marriage was to take place at once, at a country house less than twenty miles from Paris. The preliminary formalities had been gone through, with a forgery or two, no doubt, and there was to be a ceremony at the Mairie only. This news had reached Pont-le-Duc through a drunken notary of Saint Aignansur-Resle, who had received a flourishing invitation to the wedding.

‘I telegraphed to my servant in Paris, bidding him detain Pierre, and I told Justine not to expect her husband till she saw him. Late the same night Pierre and I arrived in the riverside village where the marriage was to be celebrated. I left Pierre at an inn, and went boldly to the house where the guests were assembling. It was a gaudy villa, cheaply built and furnished by some speculator for letting by the month to unclassed Parisians.

‘Virginie, I am speaking of your father in your presence; but I must tell you the truth. I have a cool head and a good nerve, but when I saw your father I fell back with a cry. Drink —



VIRGINIE

years and years of infernal drink — had suddenly done its work. He was sitting shivering by a fire of logs, although the July night was sultry enough for thunder. He seemed to have lost half his height, while he had doubled his girth. He looked a thousand years old. Nay, poor child, do not weep. Surely it is better to know that it was not thy father in his right mind, but only a wreck and an imbecile, who could doom thee to Sergius Duclos.'

Canuto moved a step towards Virginie, as if to comfort her; but she shrank from him in terror, and pressed desperately into the shelter of my arm. He looked at us for a moment, with a sad smile, and then went on with his tale.

'Gaston de Méricourt,' he said, 'was sitting with the St. Aignan notary and a man who looked like a groom, drinking long and murderous draughts of young white brandy. It was a toss-up whether he would welcome me with maudlin joy or insult me by flinging his liquor in my face. I plunged in first by thanking him effusively for an imaginary invitation to the wedding, whereupon he wrung my hand and wept pitifully, and protested that he had invited me before everyone else in the world because I was his only friend. As for the notary, he denounced him to his face as a sponger, always drunk, who had thrust himself into the affair uninvited and undesired.

'I asked about the bride. That there should be a bride at a wedding seemed to strike the

THE MIST

notary as a new idea, and he roused himself to join his enquiries with mine. But de Méricourt only mumbled and cursed till the drinking began again.

‘I made some excuse, and started exploring the house on my own account. The rooms and stairs were well lit, and it was plain that some efficient person was in charge of the arrangements. Chambermaids and abigails were everywhere, all of them clean and smart and capable; but I knew what kind of households they had come from by their airs and graces and by the slight impudence or familiarity with which they answered my questions. I gathered that there was to be a great supper, that the bridegroom and his party would arrive from Paris in three automobiles just before midnight, and that the wedding was to be celebrated at the Mairie the following morning at eleven o’clock. As for Virginie, I found that she and her father had arrived only an hour before, that Virginie had no knowledge of what was preparing, and that she had been put to bed, tear-stained and weary, and was in a profound sleep. To the housekeeper — a young, short-spoken woman of the South — I explained that I was the doctor; and after I had told her my name, which she had often heard, she took me to Virginie’s side.’

His voice trembled a little, and became lower and softer as he added;

‘Virginie, you were lying in a sleep almost as deep as your mother’s when she passed away



VIRGINIE

without my being there to close her eyes. For a moment I despaired. To abduct you — to rush with you out of danger by sheer dash — was impossible. The cooing, purring, lace-aproned, felt-shod, corrupted, false-hearted, evil-minded women on the stairs and landings were more formidable than a body-guard mailed and armed with steel. Besides, I knew Sergius Duclos. Till God should intervene he was a stronger man than I, because he would stick at nothing. If I had carried Virginie away from his grossness and wickedness, he would have taken up the challenge to a point of unspeakable outrage, and the end would have been worse than the beginning.

‘Yes. Tired and heartsick, for a moment I despaired. I looked at Virginie’s white face on her white pillow, and almost prayed that she might never waken. But out of that very blackness of despair flashed the lightning of my decision.

‘I hurried to the station, and caught the ninety-two train for Paris. By half-past eleven I was back at Virginie’s bedside with the few pinches and drops of drugs which I required already mingled in three tiny phials. So heavy was her sleep that when I propped her up to drink the draught she only half awoke, and she swallowed what I gave her as a feverish child gulps a cooling drink and falls back on the pillow asleep.

‘The bridegroom and his party dashed up on

THE MIST

the stroke of twelve. My Virginie, you are weeping. Weep on. What follows is not for such ears as thine.'

While I held Lethe to me, he looked straight at my eyes, and spoke on rapidly in hard tones, using the English language.

'Lionel Barrison, it is one more good mark to your credit that you did not start at the name of Sergius Duclos. Londoners, not Parisians, have kept alive the haunts in Paris which filled the pockets of Sergius Duclos with gold. Thank God you have never heard that accursed name till to-day. I met his friends in the hall as they tumbled out of their cars. De Méricourt and the notary rolled downstairs to meet them too. Lionel Barrison, listen. There were more women than men. Duclos had brought both his mistresses. He introduced them to the notary as the bridesmaids, and the vicious servants, clustering insolently on the stairs, broke into brutal laughter, with no one to shut their foul mouths. Except Duclos, everybody was drunk — especially the women. Their drunkenness was a bestial sight, and yet the sight of Duclos was more frightful still. Old in years and in sin, but wigged and enamelled and painted, he stood up straight among the stumbling crowd like a leering, handsome Satan in the midst of a herd of swine. Lionel Barrison, God alone knows how I stayed my hand that night from murder. Time after time in the past it had been as much as I could do to refrain from slaying de Méricourt; but,



VIRGINIE

as Duclos smiled round that garish, reeking hall, it seemed a crime to let him draw another breath. The hundred-headed wickedness of the world seemed, in his person, to be baring its neck for the avenging sword. If I had killed him, I should almost have felt as if I had killed Evil itself, and I should almost have expected to see the whole world turn into gold and roses. But I remembered the deed I had begun upstairs, and to disarm suspicion, I even sat amidst their orgie till the holy fires of dawn were smoking in the sky.'

Canuto ceased. The lyrical close of his speech had broken from his lips as easily as his baldest sentences of narrative, but it rang in my ears like a call from a silver trumpet. Despite the whole drift of his story, and its evident truthfulness, I had been listening sullenly and jealously, in the dogged belief that I was parleying with a black-guard and an enemy; but the light flared round me at last.

I tried to speak, but no words would come, and Canuto began once more, in French.

'The guests went to bed uproariously at four in the morning,' he said. 'Not one of them had seen the bride. It was part of the dull and brutal jest that she was to be awakened at seven, and to find her wedding dress and wreath in the room. But Heaven forbid that I should repeat one word that was spoken over the wine that night.

'The room the housekeeper had given me, after hearing from de Méricourt's own lips that I

THE MIST

was his darling friend, was on the same landing as Virginie's, and I kept watch without going to bed. A little before seven, two chattering maids, carrying great cardboard boxes, passed my door and opened Virginie's. I threw off my coat, and lay down on the bed as if asleep.

'My work had been well done. Within thirty seconds the maids were clutching at my door-handle. They half rushed, half fell into the curtained room, and gasped out incoherent words. I sprang up and followed them. They led the way to Virginie's door, but dared not enter with me. Virginie . . . you guess the rest.

'We roused the house, but it seemed to be the instinct of the whole cowardly crew to rush away from death. That they should have been horror-struck and unutterably shocked was to be expected; but, over and above all that, there was a pitiable panic, a contemptible whimpering and cowering, as if they were savages or children skulking away from some grisly terror.

'Lionel Barrison,' he added in English, 'never shall I forget that hour. One curtain only was drawn back from the window, and Virginie's bed was in the shadow. Little by little, as they scraped up their miserable courage, the crowd in the room grew. The women from Paris, who had shone at the supper with a certain kind of hard elegance and animal beauty, clung together, unkempt and half clad, all limp and shapeless and ugly and old, quailing before the terror which they, too, so soon would have to face. The men,

hideous as a nightmare without his
he dared not cross the threshold. Fro
of the house, upstairs and down, th
women in hysterics broke horribly on th
'Only one voice suggested drugs. C
keeper from Provence declared that
fatigue and drowsiness on her arrival fr
were not natural, and that Monsieur
court, by some drunken blundering, ha
given her an enormous dose of a sleepin
which had caused her death. To su
theory, she said that de Méricourt,
realising his mistake, had sent me, t
to Virginie's room almost as soon as I
'I took her up boldly. This, I sai
overdose of an opiate. Then I drew
court and Duclos aside, and — it had
— I lied my great lie. To de Méri
sobered by the shock, I explained t
known Virginie's constitution for year
there had been a sudden stoppage of
To Duclos I declared sternly that dou
servant had rudely broken the news c
before her to his bride, and that the sh

THE MIST

'Duclos, still on the door-mat, heard me sullenly, and I braced myself up to meet a charge of trickery or foul play. But, the next moment, the bigger and less vicious of his mistresses bore down upon us. "Heaven has snatched that angel away just in time, Sergius," she wailed, "because you are a devil. Yes, a devil! We're all beasts and swine and devils together, and we're all on the way to hell. Marthe — some brandy, quick!" As she spoke she flung herself against his shoulder heavily; but he repelled her roughly, and turned pale with rage and fear.

'I followed up the advantage, and demanded to know what was to be done. "You don't want a newspaper scandal," I said; and Duclos jumped nervously at the words. "Sergius Duclos, you don't want it said that a young girl died of fear at the thought of marrying you. We'd better be plain. If it is said . . . people will believe it. And, if the whole story of this marriage comes out —"

'He cut me short savagely. "It's worth a hundred thousand francs to me to have no bothers just now," he said. "If you can hush the job up, I can pay the money in a month."

'I allowed him to think that I would accept his money. More, I even let him think that I was fool enough to believe he would really pay it. In half an hour the affair was arranged. I discovered that the mayor of the commune was a despicable creature, already in the pay of Duclos, and that the wedding had been planned to take

and joined with me, after a moment's
in certifying the death. Then, in my
Méricourt's best friend, I took in hand
Never mind the details. The point
one desire of everyone in the house
Méricourt downwards, was to see
body go. Pierre, who was in my
drove the cart. On the pretext of
Paris, we took a cross-country track
thirty miles to a station on the line
and, in the deserted hut of some charco
in the heart of a forest, I revived Vi
refilled her coffin with sand and brush
stones.

'Virginie,' he continued, looking at her
and addressing her in French, 'when I
back to life, I found your memory was
had neither intended nor foreseen as
the kind, and, at first, I bent all my s
doing so fearful a mischief. But the
served me too well. Virginie, my poor
it may be that the memories of your y
hood up to that fatal night have bee
from your mind for ever. And yet, if
we ought to all thank God

THE MIST

did her simple duty and asked no questions. Four hours later I rejoined Pierre, and we resumed our journey through the beech woods to the wayside station, where we found a train for the West.

‘Virginie, I have one crumb of comfort. I held back from sacrilege. In the face of the indignation of the village, I stoutly declined religious rites on the day when we laid the box of sand in this vault. But, for that very reason, the poor people who had loved you poured out for you a thousandfold their simple prayers. You shudder. So did I. They were cheated. And yet, why should we upbraid ourselves too much? It has never hurt a man or a woman yet to pray. Prayers and love — love and prayers — the more men give of these the more they have to give again. Besides, was it not meet and right that they should pray for your soul? Banished from mind and memory, was it not wandering, your poor soul, in a blank and chill and awful darkness more terrible than the shadow of death? No, there has been no sacrilege. Or, if sacrilege there has been, the great good has swallowed up the little evil.

‘None but Pierre and Justine and we three know the secret. Lionel Barrison, Pierre has seen you, and he trusts you. At first, he almost revolted from leaving Virginie in your care, but he trusts you at last. Pierre, come here!’

Canuto moved aside, and Nicolo, shaggier than ever, appeared in the doorway of the vault. At

in adoration, and murmured thickly:

‘It is Pierre — thy poor old Pie Justine ——’

But Canuto took him kindly by the raised him up and bade him begone.

‘Not yet, Pierre,’ he said. ‘Not yet must have patience. Go back to the cl wait till we have done.’



CHAPTER IX

CANUTO's recital had already lasted longer than his mocking duologue in the darkness of the ruined tower; and yet, although no gag bound my lips, I had hardly uttered a word. Even the apparition of Nicolo could not break the spell, and when his master stood once more alone in the doorway I simply sat and waited.

'All the rest of the tale,' Canuto said, 'you know — or nearly all. Pierre and I returned to Paris. Thence we took Virginie to Westhampton. Save that I put her to sleep, so that she had to be borne on and off the ship in an invalid's chair, Virginie travelled like everybody else. It was not till the morning after that I vested and garlanded her as Fame and laid her in the ice. Everything else you know already.'

He swung round on his heel and lounged against the doorpost with his back towards us, gazing into the mist.

My heart sank. It was as though he had slammed the door of the vault and locked us up in the dark. If this was indeed the end of his tale, the mystery was deeper than ever. Why had he brought me Lethe in a block of ice?



VIRGINIE

What was the meaning of the midnight kidnapping, and of the dreadful ritual round the funeral pyre? How was I to explain the mad letters and the madder books? As soon as his magnetic glance was withdrawn I began to doubt the whole story, and to believe that he was a maniac or a scoundrel after all.

Yet disbelieving was even harder than believing. It was clear that Nicolo was indeed the simple, honest Pierre who had helped to brighten Virginie's desolate childhood; and, where so much was truth, how could I fix the point where falsehood or wild fancy began?

I rose to my feet, raising Virginie with me, and still encircling her with my arm. At the sound Canuto swung round again and faced us. He had read my thoughts.

'Virginie,' he began, 'Lionel Barrison . . . I have told you all. I mean, all the facts, all the outward history. As for all the spirit, all the meaning . . . it is better that you should sit awhile in this quiet and holy place and draw it out for yourselves. I have spoken enough.'

'No,' I cried; finding words at last. 'You have not spoken enough. Suppose I grant your awful tale is true, why did you drug Virginie a second time, needlessly, cruelly, horribly? Why did you bring her to me with trickery and lies? Why did you torture and hurt us? Why did you tear us apart at the cross-roads and re-unite us in the tower? Why have you written again and again to sneer at me and mock me? And,

THE MIST

when we leave this vault . . . what is to be the end?’

‘Lionel Barrison,’ he answered gently, ‘have your will. You bid me satisfy your mind by putting into words — bald, hurrying words — the things which ought to steal over your soul in their own ways and at their own times, like solemn sounds and sweet perfumes. Have your will. But remember that words cannot suffice. I shall speak, here and now, with my tongue. You will listen, here and now, with your ears. But it can only be hereafter, with your spirit, that you will understand.

‘Lionel, Virginie . . . what was the work that had been given me to do? To deliver Virginie from Sergius Duclos — to snatch the white lamb from the wolf’s red maw? No. That was no more than a frightful episode. My work, my charge, was to bless Virginie with the bliss of young love. Have I not made it clear enough already? Lionel Barrison, you may call it mystical madness if you like; but it was my work to lead Virginie forth like a white young priestess, to restore all that sweet young love of which this starving world was cheated in the life of Blanche de la Freyne.

‘Think upon it, both of you. Think of it to-day. Think of it every day, till you come to see that it was not a madman’s prank, but a cool choosing of means for ends, as deliberate as a general’s strategy or an architect’s plans.

‘Lionel, I had learned more than you would

gish courtship, your come-day go
life. Heavens! Do I not know y
lovers? For the beginning, a more
worship of the bride's beauty; for t
dog-like attachment, a dog-like unre
tion; for the end . . . No, never m
Virginie, these are mean and shr
At Westhampton I knew what y
young health could stand. I laid yo
trance of body because the husband
was carrying you lay in a trance of so
you awoke together, you and he.
weeks ago he was a lad, and a spirit
to-day he is a man, and a lover.

'Lionel Barrison, I probe souls
bodies. I knew your malady. You
the English disease. Travelling on
excellent English dislike of shewing
you were fast tending to the dislike c
feelings to shew. Alas for your c
Englishman with a grand passion is
lover in the world; but you are becc
of mere married chums, of little pa
passions at all.

'I tell you. Virginie belongs to l



THE MIST

belongs to love — to the love which makes the seas flow and the sun rise and the mountains stand fast. Would you have had me introduce you in a drawing-room, over cups of tea? Lionel Barrison, I chose to fling you together so as to wake up every atom of manhood and romance and chivalry in your nature. Answer me. You remember the hour when you wooed Lethe back to life? Could you have become more passionately her lover, more proudly her champion, more chastely her knight, if, mailed in silver armour and riding a milk-white horse, you had roused her from magic sleep in an enchanted wood of eld?’

Perhaps I was confused by the unworldly newness and strangeness of his revelation. Or perhaps some subconscious petulance at his frankness deranged me. Anyhow, I gave way to an ignoble impulse, and demanded cynically, in English:

‘What if you had mistaken your man? What if it had turned out that, instead of a knight’s castle, you had left Virginie under a common roof with ordinary flesh and blood? What if —’

‘Hold,’ he said sternly, flushing with pride and anger. ‘You have said enough. I understand. At this sacred moment you have put a second-rate question. I will answer it with a second-rate answer. As a man of the world, you ask what would have happened if you had not respected Virginie. As a man of the world I reply that in any case I should have seen to it that you

was guided. Yes. At every stage of through all these nineteen years, I guided. Lionel Barrison, I do not c you on your question.'

'Forgive me,' I cried eagerly. 'Th was not mine. Some devil spoke th lips. But go on. Your tale is so terri beautiful that I am stunned and dazed on. The cross-roads . . . the ruined t

'At the cross-roads,' he said, sp French, 'the chances were against ou you. Had you given us the slip, I ha tracing you which you could never g I tell you I was guided. You came.

'Two motives impelled me to lash yo the ordeals of that night. I had to tak of the possible detection of my trick, a vengeance of Sergius Duclos. It wa not I, who invented the driving of hi mad by nocturnal torture and horror. (for seventy thousand francs, at the cor a vile Brazilian, he seized the Brazilian's handsome rival and . . . But no. Tha wait. Barrison, the point is this. S



THE MIST

tested you with so cruel a testing that it made my own heart bleed. But it was worth while. Know this. If you had turned coward, you would never again have seen Virginie after that night. Virginie, be proud of your husband to your life's end. He is braver than a lion, and truer than steel.'

At the title Canuto had given me, Lethe blushed deeply, and would have moved from my side; but I held her fast, while Canuto spoke on.

'Yes,' he said; 'that was the main reason for our night's work in the tower — to test you and school you against Sergius Duclos. But there was another reason. Why did I wrench you apart in the dead of the night, so that you believed you would never see Virginie any more? I will tell you. I did not spy on you during your first week of golden days in your rose-garden; but, on Sunday, in the corn-field, I saw what your love lacked. It was too soft, too dreamy. I had to teach you your eternal need of one another, through one bitter hour of loss. I broke you in twain that you might be re-welded in fire and tears. I don't profess omniscience. Whither you flew that night, and what you did, is outside my knowledge. But I know you loved each other, when Tuesday's dawn broke, a thousand-fold more than when Monday's light faded away.

'Lionel Barrison, you open your eyes wide. You doubt me. You do not believe my wild story and my far-fetched explanations. Or,

these thirteen days, you remember my flippancy and bombast. My defence is Sarcasm, jesting, teasing — they have become a daily idiom. I have learned them delicately as one learns a language. And why? Because I don't want all the world to know that I am with me a sad and a heavy heart. I have been with you because I jest with all the world no more.

'More. You think that, however high it has been, I have nevertheless found a certain excitement in the deeds of Pierre and I have done. You think of me as an overgrown schoolboy intent for a whole fortnight on an overgrown prank.

'This much I will confess. In the one year just past I have lived more life than in forty years that have gone before it. Now I am a weak and vain creature; and I confess I have pleased me to know that I, a mere scientist, have been able, after twenty years in the laboratory, to fight a good fight, to even a Sergius Duclos, to rush through the world as a man of action, to prepare an



THE MIST

an every-day worlding. A saint would have chosen to do this work unseen and unknown; but I, busy and assertive and proud, have worked so that when all is over I shall be able to sit down complacently and trace my hand-prints and foot-marks through it all.

‘So much I confess. But God knows that, while the work was a-doing, I cared only that it should be well done. No, Lionel Barrison, no; if I have plagued and giped you into torturing fears, I have done it, not to amuse myself, but to cut and polish the rough, dull diamond of your love into a thousand bright facets of exquisite pain. I have only sharpened my wit to sharpen your love. If I have hounded you through ice and fire and flood and darkness, it has been all that you might snap the petty chains of artificiality, that you might bathe your souls in the elemental eternal things, that you might become, you and Virginie, as great and high and splendid in your love as twin stars burning softly on for ever. Take my story or leave it. I have done.’

CHAPTER X

AGAINST the blank curtain of ghostly mist stood and waited for the answer that I could give. He regarded me in silence. Then his eyes on Virginia, he said:

'Yes. The tale is told. So much for the past. Now for the future. Lionel Barrison, you know me what would be the end. You would know what is to happen after we leave this vault.

'Virginia, listen. The danger is past. In the course in the eyes of the world, Virginia's court is dead, and no one must be trusted to keep our secret. But the danger is over.

Duclos died last week. Virginia, my poor little Virginia, be brave to the end. Thy father killed him. Sergius Duclos insulted thy father's memory and thy mother's name. Thy father killed him.

He seized a bottle, a full bottle, and struck the neck, and killed him at a single blow. Hear all. There has been no affair, no plot. The friends of Sergius took care of that.

THE MIST

Duclos he lay speechless and motionless, spurning every morsel of food and even every drop of drink. On the last night he sat up in a chair and talked calmly of many things. I am speaking the truth. My Virginie, this is no pious lie to comfort thee. In that accursed house there was one servant with the ruins of a woman's heart not utterly mouldered away. I have the history from her lips. In the last minute of his eleventh hour Gaston de Méricourt, with all his wits about him, repented of his evil life. It was not the panic of a coward; it was the calm act of a man whose eyes had been opened. The vicaire arrived too late. But before thy father died he invoked thy mother's prayers for his own soul and for thine. God is merciful. May he rest in peace.'

They crossed themselves, Canuto with uncovered head, Virginie with shaken frame and streaming eyes. And I, too, made the holy sign, blunderingly, clumsily, but with as full a faith as theirs.

Canuto gazed at Virginie, and opened his arms. Within my heart there raged a tremendous battle, but charity triumphed. I relaxed my clasp of her waist, and let Virginie go. But she did not stir from my side till Canuto advanced towards her, with arms still extended, repeating:

'Virginie . . . my little Virginie . . . my poor Virginie . . .'

Slowly, shyly, timidly she faltered to his breast. He enfolded her with infinite reverence, and murmured, so softly that I hardly heard him:

To-day this vault shall be locked up
Go back to thy new country. Love th
and be happy at last.'

He drew her weeping face up to hi
upon her lips a long, quiet kiss.

'Indulge me, Lionel Barrison,' I
length, looking at me with his sad
is the first kiss, and the last.'

I stood rooted to the ground, gazin
in anguish. I saw Canuto, handsom
masterful, almost young, with the
angel and the body of a god. I saw
grand lover, and I saw Virginie in h
as the grandly beloved; and, althoug
my heart, I knew that she was more
than mine.

He made as though he would
within my clasp, but I sprang a step a

'No,' I cried. My soul was wrun
heart was bleeding at the sacrifice, but
no other. 'No. Let Virginie choo
us. She is no more mine than yours.
on her hand means nothing. I a
ginie's husband. And Virginie does n



THE MIST

verse to have had them back again. For one bitter moment I believed that he was about to take me at my word. Then he led Virginie back to my side, and joined her hand with mine.

'Lionel Barrison,' he said, smiling kindly, 'you are the man I thought. But consider. I am charged to bless this little Virginie with love, young love. Do you not see that I am an old man?'

I looked at his dark, curling hair and clear skin and lithe limbs and keen eyes, and I shook my head.

'Besides,' he continued, 'if . . . if this were the way, can't you see that I would have taken it long ago, without waiting for your own or any other man's chance word? If this were the way . . . there would have been no room for Sergius Duclos, no need for the block of ice or the ruined tower. Is it not so?'

In spite of myself, I shook my head again.

The smile died from his face. His cheeks became ashen grey. For the first time he gave way to emotion, and it was an emotion so terrible that Virginie clung to me in fright, and I, too, held my breath.

'Lionel Barrison,' he cried, in tones of sharp despair which rang and echoed among the tombs of the vault, 'why have you not guessed? Why are you all feeling and courage and no brains? Why do you tear open my old wound to the bottom?'

I quailed before his mysterious agony.



VIRGINIE

'Is it not as plain as noon-day?' he cried again fiercely. 'Why was it to me, to me, that Blanche de Méricourt wrote from her dying bed? Why was it to me, to me, that she gave her dying charge? It is plainer than the sun. Because it was I who had wronged her! Because it was I who had robbed her, and robbed the world, of all that love. Because it was I who would not trust her. Because it was I who ran away. Because it was I who was the cur, the groundling, the coward. Yes, it was I, it was I, it was I!'

Awestruck, I stared at him without a word. Then I dropped Virginie's, and seized his fine, small hand, with a choking at my throat. He returned my grip till I winced with pain.

'Lionel Barrison,' he said brokenly, speaking in English, close to my ear, 'help me. I have pretended to be the cool, strong man. I say, help me. I am a poor, weak wretch of common flesh and blood. Do you think it has not come to me a thousand times, this temptation of the devil? Let it not come from your lips too. Can you not guess why, when she was budding into womanhood, into her mother's very image, I denied myself the sight of Virginie? Do you think I haven't had to fight it off in a hundred plausible disguises — this impulse to possess her youth and beauty? Do you think the devil has never visited me, in the guise of an angel and with the words of a poet, urging me to cherish Virginie with the love of which I cheated Blanche de la Freyne? Lionel Barrison, you are too



THE MIST

splendid in your self-sacrifice to be the ally of the devil. I say, help me.'

He broke off suddenly, and half turned away his head. I followed his gaze till it rested on the forlorn grave outside the vault — the grave with the broken pillar. When he spoke again it was in a voice that was hushed and sweet.

'My bride lies there,' he said. 'Her soul is with us as we are talking in this vault, or it rests deep in peace with God. But her body lies there. The lips I never dared to touch are there. The heart that beat for me is there. The hand I held and pressed and kissed and flung away is there. De Méricourt is dead. There will be none to say me nay. When my time comes, Pierre, or Pierre's sons, will lay me at her side. I say, help me. If you can pray, pray that God's saints and virgins may keep me true to the end.'

He dropped my hand abruptly, and strode out into the mist. At the broken pillar he halted, and stood looking towards the muffled sea.

Rapt, I gazed upon him as one would gaze upon a god. In the radiance of his immortal love my passion for Virginie seemed to dim and dwindle into a small and selfish and earthly thing.

It was Virginie who spoke first. She faltered: 'Don't send me away.'

Her little hand trembled in mine. At its gentle touch, and at the soft summons of her voice, my immense love for her re-awakened, and I knew that in the ears of God it was resounding



VIRGINIE

as mightily as Canuto's, like deep calling unto deep.

'Send you away?' I echoed, bewildered.

'No,' she whispered. 'He is kind and good, and he loves us both. But don't send me away, with . . . him.'

I laid my two hands upon her shoulders, and looked her in the eyes. At first she met my gaze a little proudly, as if we were once more standing by the low hedge of our corn-field. Then, with a burst of tears, once more she flung herself against my heart.

'You are cruel to me,' she sobbed. 'You said that Virginie did not love you. If you send her away she will die.'

In a single moment I had been raised to the peak whence I could see all the kingdoms of the world and call them mine. Yet, once more, it was peace instead of ecstasy that filled and overbrimmed my soul. I did not even kiss the brow that pressed against my cheek. It was enough to hold her lightly in my arms, and to know that she was my own.

THE END.





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